

SARTRE'S STUDY OF FLAUBERT, L'IDIOT DE LA FAMILLE:
A PRISMATIC APPROACH

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This is to certify that this thesis is all my own work and that all sources used in its preparation have been acknowledged.

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Sartre's study L'Idiot de la famille is an attempt to answer the question he posed in the Preface: "What can one know of a man today?" It represents the culmination of Sartre's life's work and contains traces of his diverse preoccupations, all of which may be seen to revolve around the central one of communicating the essence of man.

L'Idiot de la famille is in three volumes, and covers the life of Gustave Flaubert up to the publication of Madame Bovary. (The fourth volume, which would have been a literary analysis of Madame Bovary on structuralist lines, was abandoned when Sartre's sight failed.) The first two volumes are divided into three main parts, covering Flaubert's childhood, his adolescence and the Pont L'Evêque crisis. They also contain a number of analyses which do not directly concern Flaubert, including boredom, laughter, stupidity, dreaming, the imaginary and language. Volumes I and II demonstrate an application of the type of literary Freudian psychoanalysis pioneered by Marie Bonaparte in her work on Edgar Allan Poe. They also give expression to Sartre's views on language and literature, as well as emphasising his individualist philosophy. The third volume is an attempt to show that Flaubert's neurosis was part of the neurosis of the times, by comparing it with other writers' attitudes; for example, there is a lengthy discussion of the life of Leconte de Lisle. It is in this volume that some critics feel Sartre comes closest to giving a Marxist analysis of the social structure of the society in which Flaubert lived.

The idea for what eventually become L'Idiot de la famille was first suggested in about 1954 by Roger Garaudy. Garaudy, a leading intellectual in the French Communist Party, proposed to Sartre that they undertake to

study a man, he through Marxist methodology and Sartre through existentialism. The subject and the title of the work were soon chosen. However, although Sartre began writing with great enthusiasm, the project failed to come to fruition. This did not prevent Sartre, whose intellectual preoccupation with Flaubert had already been demonstrated in L'Être et le néant and in Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, from continuing to pursue this interest, and from linking it with his numerous contemporary concerns. These included Marxism, the position of the Communist Party, the New Novel, psychoanalysis, the Algerian war, the conferring of honours and the freedom of the individual.

According to Iris Murdoch¹, Sartre is a philosopher whose interests span three post-Hegelian movements of thought: the Marxist, the existentialist and the phenomenological. With Marxism, Sartre shared a passion for action, and to a certain extent he used its analytical method. From Kierkegaard's existentialism, he took the picture of man as a lonely, anguished being, but he rejected the hidden Kierkegaardian God. In his philosophy, in an attempt to define 'human reality', Sartre used a notion of consciousness derived from a Husserlian vocabulary, which he combined with psychological insights suggested by Freud. Furthermore, an anti-Cartesian attack on the mind-body dualism is matched with a Cartesian insistence upon the authority of consciousness in determining its own significance. One is also aware of the influence of both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on Sartre's writings. Sartre rarely acknowledged the sources of his ideas, but Aron has pointed to similarities between Sartre's work and that of the German sociologists. He noted in particular that "Sartrean

1 Iris Murdoch, Sartre; romantic rationalist, London, Bowes and Bowes, 1953, p. 7.

consciousness encompasses the goal-directed rationality of Weber at the same time as the 'lived experience' of Dilthey".²

In an interview³, Sartre said that in order to discuss Flaubert, he had to write about the dialectic: "La preuve c'est que, dans l'article polonais⁴, je n'ai pas pu m'empêcher de parler de lui et, inversement, que j'ai transporté dans Critique de la raison dialectique de longs passages que j'avais mis dans mon livre sur lui." The Critique de la raison dialectique was thus a necessary prelude to L'Idiot de la famille. On a theoretical level, the Critique was an attempt to recapture man inside Marxism, and to show that although Marxism might prove the best framework for looking at society, its analytical method was useless for investigating the essence of man. The Critique provided an exposition of Sartre's world view and this exposition allowed him to complete a study which 'n'aura pas besoin de bandage herniaire'⁵.

In Question de méthode, Sartre set out the methodology which he intended to use in his study. He summarised it as follows:

"La méthode marxiste est progressive parce qu'elle est le résultat de longues analyses . . . Notre méthode est euristique, elle nous apprend du neuf parce qu'elle est régressive et progressive tout à la fois. Son premier soin est, comme celui du marxiste, de replacer l'homme dans son cadre . . . La méthode existentialiste veut rester euristique. Elle n'aura d'autre moyen que le 'va-et-vient': elle déterminera progressivement la biographie en approfondissant l'époque,

2 Raymond Aron, History and the dialectic of violence, Oxford, Blackwell, 1975, p. 8.

3 J.-P. Sartre, "Les écrivains en personne", in Situations IX, Paris, Gallimard, 1972.

4 Published in a revised form as Question de méthode, the prefatory essay to Critique de la raison dialectique.

5 Les écrivains en personne, p. 12.

et l'époque en approfondissant la biographie. Loin de chercher sur-le-champ à intégrer l'une à l'autre, elle les maintiendra séparées jusqu'à ce que l'enveloppement réciproque se fasse de lui-même et mette un terme provisoire à la recherche."⁶

The method is very reminiscent of that used by Freud, with whose work Sartre had become acquainted through The psychopathology of everyday life. Like the majority of Frenchmen, Sartre felt a repugnance for psychoanalysis; having been educated in the Cartesian tradition, he was shocked by the very idea of the unconscious, and perturbed by the ambiguity of the terminology used. However, a closer examination of Freud's writings showed him that

"La pensée de Freud et celle de Marx sont toutes deux des théories du conditionnement extérieur. Quand Marx dit: 'Peu importe ce que la bourgeoisie croit faire, l'important c'est ce qu'elle fait; il suffit de remplacer 'la bourgeoisie' par 'un hystérique' pour que la formule puisse être de Freud.'"⁷

In Question de méthode⁸, Sartre wrote that only psychoanalysis could enable us to study the process by which a child, groping in the dark, is going to attempt to play, without understanding it, the social role which adults impose on him. Sartre's use of psychoanalysis would not be totally Freudian, however, because he regarded the theory of Freudian psychoanalysis as 'soft thought', with no dialectical logic to it⁹. His views on the value of psychoanalysis were further modified. Whilst working on L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre became acquainted with the work of Bruno Bettelheim on autistic children¹⁰. He accepted Bettelheim's

6 J-P. Sartre, Question de méthode, pp.86-87.

7 J-P. Sartre, "Sartre par Sartre", in Situations IX, pp. 103-104.

8 Question de méthode, p. 46.

9 Sartre par Sartre, p. 107.

10 This was mentioned by Simone de Beauvoir in her autobiography. I quote from memory.

proposition that children could be affected by attitudes towards them from birth; that there was no such time as an age of innocence; and that infants could also act on their surroundings.

In his theoretical works, Sartre had often expressed the desire to lay the political foundations of anthropology - the study of man. In Question de méthode, he proposed an anthropology which would serve as a tool in the development of Marxism, by combining Freudian and existential insights with Marxist methodology. In an interview, he formulated the important aspect of the study of man:

"What is essential is not what one has made of man, but what he has made of what one has made of him. What one has made of man are the structures, the signifying wholes, studied by the human sciences. What he makes is history itself, the actual surpassing of these structures in a totalising praxis. Philosophy is situated at the juncture . . . The philosopher is the one who attempts to think this surpassing."¹¹

Sartre's regressive-progressive method was open to criticism on a number of levels. Because of its acceptance of the partial validity of Freudian psychoanalysis as a method of investigation, he could not expect the method to be accepted as neo-Marxist by members of the Communist Party, since the Communist Party disavowed the work of Freud, in favour of Pavlovian psychology. Lévi-Strauss, whose Marxist-based Structuralism was a rival method of investigation, pointed out that it is false to claim the regressive-progressive method as new, even in the human sciences, since in fact it is the method anthropologists have been applying for years¹². Indeed, Sartre's methodology shows traces of both Marxist and

11 "J-P. Sartre répond", Arc, no. 30, 1966.

12 Claude Lévi-Strauss, The savage mind, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, Chapter 9.

non-Marxist thought, and reflects the problem with which he had wrestled for years:

"Nous étions convaincus en même temps que le matérialisme historique fournissait la seule interprétation valable de l'histoire et que l'existentialisme restait la seule approche concrète de la réalité."¹³

The relationship between men plays a very important part in L'Idiot de la famille. Sartre laid the groundwork for a discussion of this in L'être et le néant and in Critique de la raison dialectique. He regarded all relationships as mediated by a third party, which may be seen as matter, but which can also be that part of man which belongs to the social order. He is not only concerned with the construction of social relations, but also with the causes of alienation. He contended that alienation occurred when the mediated relationship was not transcended. Alienation may also occur when a dominant partner in a relationship dehumanises himself to be able to cope with the humiliating of the other - in other words, when he does not have the courage to be proud of the evil and suffering he causes. On the other hand, the relationship can be transcended by the oppressed party: Sartre maintained that the oppressed person is in a position to interiorise the values of his oppressor to the point where those values become a weapon. Balandier has drawn perhaps unjustified attention to this by naming it the theory of negritude and proposing it as the basis of Sartre's anthropological studies and the foundation of a political anthropology.¹⁴

13 Question de méthode, p. 24.

14 Georges Balandier, Political anthropology, London, Allen Lane, 1970, p. 185.

Human relations are bonded by language. "[le mot] transporte en moi les projets de l'autre et dans l'Autre mes propres projets. Il n'est pas douteux qu'on pourrait étudier le langage de la même façon que la monnaie: comme matérialité circulante, inerte, unifiant des dispersions."¹⁵ Taking the notion that language is matter, Sartre claims that man is inside language, and on the basis of this formulation he states that one can know something of a writer's relationship with his society by studying in his writing his use of language.

Sartre's preoccupation with literature and the use of language is obvious in L'Idiot de la famille. Qu'est-ce que la littérature? set out in forceful terms his belief in a committed literature, a belief which was recognisably Marxist-Leninist. He considered prose the only acceptable literature; prose writing represented communication and therefore action. At the time of the publication of Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, he accepted the commitment of the poet to write, but only because man is free to choose his own future, and denigrated the poet's project by regarding it a commitment to failure¹⁶. In L'Idiot de la famille, a man's commitment to poetry or Art becomes the only valid project in certain circumstances. Although Sartre's view of the novelist has been modified over the years, his views on the novel have varied little. The novel, as he explained in the Preface to Nathalie Sarraute's Portrait d'un inconnu, should seek the truth of the situation, without the perspective of the omniscient narrator. This was the approach he was to adopt in L'Idiot de la famille, which he regarded among other things, as an attempt to create a novel.

15 Critique, p. 180.

16 J.-P. Sartre, "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" in Situations II, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, p. 85, n. 4.

Sartre claimed that L'Idiot de la famille was a fictional work. It can be seen to conform in some ways to his definition of the novel. He had attempted in the past to construct works of the imagination, so that events portrayed formed a whole, whose meaning was intelligible when the totality was achieved. However, in his fictional writing, Sartre had found himself unable to do justice to the complexities of lived experience. He therefore turned to biography, as a more adequate form in which to unify the various isolated and inter-connecting dimensions of a given life in order to produce a fictional work. L'Idiot de la famille is an example of such an attempt. It does not read as a conventional biography. Its disregard of chronology is based both on Sartre's view of the novelistic experience, and also on his view of history - since his subject is dead and events cannot be altered, it makes no difference at which point one enters the life, nor in which order the events are recounted¹⁷.

Imagination and the imaginary have played an important part in Sartre's philosophical universe. His theory of the imagination is set out in one of his earliest works, L'Imaginaire, where he posited imagination as a mode of consciousness, and even an essential structure of consciousness. Sartre described two distinct mental functions, perceiving and imagining. Memory, perception and anticipation are addressed to the real, past, present and future. Imagination introduces the unreal, is timeless and allows man to act in the imagined world on actions committed in the real world. Barnes¹⁸ comments that without the possibility of imagining - i.e. creating the unreal - a man would be wholly engulfed, swallowed up in the real. In L'Idiot de la famille,

17 J-P. Sartre, Les mots, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 168.

18 Hazel Barnes, Sartre, London, Quartet, 1974, p. 69.

Sartre examined Flaubert's dealings with society as an escape into the unreal. He admitted that certain aspects of the life of Flaubert as he depicted them were the product of his own imagination. In fact, imagination and Sartre's theory of the imaginary are the touchstone of the work.

Sartre employs a variety of approaches in his investigation of the question: 'What can one know of a man today?' Each approach will tell the reader something more about Flaubert, the obvious 'man' of the question. Each approach will also tell something about another man - the man who formulated the study, asked the questions and suggested the answers. Sartre acknowledges the ambiguity of his question and gives the perspicacious reader revealing glimpses of his own inner self. The book reads like a detective's notebook. Perhaps one could say that, after reading L'Idiot de la famille, one knows almost everything about the subject under investigation, and about the investigator. This is possible because throughout L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre is concerned with a tenuous pattern formed by the tension between the real and the imaginary, and Flaubert's perception of himself within this pattern. The reader becomes aware of a superimposed and even more tenuous pattern, the tension between Sartre's perception of himself and his imagining of Flaubert.

Sartre has mentioned that he, like many other writers, was fascinated by Kafka's Metamorphosis. Like L'Idiot de la famille, this is a multifaceted work. Sartre took one aspect of Metamorphosis and used it to express the oppressive father/son relationship, existing between

Achille-Cléophas and Gustave Flaubert, for he saw Kafka's story as the supreme literary example, in the twentieth century, of this phenomenon. Another aspect of Metamorphosis which has fascinated Sartre is the idea of a change in the body, whether actual or imagined. In La nausée, for example, this was a major theme. The transformation from one state to another, as if by magic, is at the centre of Sartre's theory of the imaginary. Yet perhaps the most striking exposition of the idea of the Metamorphosis is to be found in L'Idiot de la famille. Here the reader is confronted with continual changes of state. The facts around which the study is built are now verifiable, now pure imagination. The methodology is now identifiably Marxist, now would-be Marxist; now Freudian, now would-be Freudian. The most amazing change of state, however, is that which the central figure undergoes - he is now Flaubert, now Sartre, now fragments of both. Refraction and metamorphoses interact and play on the central theme of the work - the essence of a man, highlighting both Sartre and Flaubert, separating their identities and fusing them.

This study regards L'Idiot de la famille as a prismatic work. Sartre has taken several approaches in his investigation, each of which fulfils the function of a single facet in the prism. The approaches are often difficult to disentangle; each is constructed from the same type of facts as the others, that is to say objective or verifiable facts, facts taken from Flaubert's writings, and facts imagined by Sartre; each is subjected to the same methodological investigations, Marxist, Freudian and Sartrean. The approaches represent a series of inter-related attempts to answer the same question. Each may also be seen as a search for identity or authenticity.

Each facet of the prism will be dealt with in a separate chapter of this study. The first, entitled 'Man in society' will consider L'Idiot de la famille as an example of Sartre's 'anthropological' writings. 'The solitary individual' will show Sartre's work as an investigation of the self and the search for identity both in the real or political world and in the symbolic or imagined world. The chapter regarding the third facet, 'The theft of language', considers Sartre's interest in the use of language. The fifth chapter, 'A crime committed against whom?', takes its title in part from Sartre's assertion (related to the content of chapter four) that Flaubert stole language from men, and also from his insistence that a good novel should read like a detective story. 'A crime committed against whom?' discusses Sartre's view of the novel and his comments on the novelist as put forward in L'Idiot de la famille. The last two chapters regard L'Idiot de la famille as a biography, and present the two faces of biography. 'A man imagined?' examines theories of biography and takes Flaubert as the central figure. 'A man perceived?' considers L'Idiot de la famille as a study of Sartre himself.

This prismatic work has a special quality - the stuff of which the prism itself is made. It derives from Sartre's theory of the imaginary as set out in L'Imaginaire. Through the example of an impersonation, Sartre shows how perception and imagination may inter-relate to produce a 'hybrid condition' where both faculties are used simultaneously. Throughout the work, the reader is constantly aware of the fact that Sartre constructs the real from the imagined and the imagined from the

real. The way in which he achieves this construction is only apparent after the reader has finished the lengthy work and pondered on its intrigue.

I shall examine each of the facets of L'Idiot de la famille in terms of the mainstream theories in the disciplines which each chapter brings to bear on the facets of Sartre's work. This examination is intended to demonstrate that Sartre's study is successful to a greater or lesser degree on all levels, provided the reader is mindful of the work's dependence on the theory of the imaginary. I hope to demonstrate not only that the intricate construction of L'Idiot de la famille is an intellectual tour de force, but also that each facet of the work sheds light on Sartre's ultimate answer to his question: "What can one know of a man today?"

MAN IN SOCIETY; L'IDIOT DE LA FAMILLE AS

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY

Throughout his long career, Jean-Paul Sartre has continually reminded us of his interest in anthropology, and of his desire to found a science of man, which would be historical and structural. L'Idiot de la famille is an example of the application of his own method of investigation. L'Idiot de la famille can be evaluated by comparison with the mainstream theories of contemporary anthropology. Sartre's study may be viewed as an attempt to unite two distinct trends in anthropological investigation: the type of social anthropology predominant in Britain and Europe, known as Structural Anthropology, whose major proponent is Claude Lévi-Strauss; and the cultural anthropology favoured by many American scholars, among whom Robert Redfield is a respected figure. In other words, it may be viewed as an attempt to present an analysis of the structure and content of the society in which Flaubert lived.

T. H. Adamowski, reviewing L'Idiot de la famille, placed the work in an anthropological context by drawing a parallel between Sartre's writings and those of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He commented that¹ L'Idiot de la famille was one in a line of Sartrean 'mythologiques'² which began in 1946 with Baudelaire; these studies sought to answer the question: "What can we know of a man today?"

1 T. H. Adamowski, 'The condemned of Rouen: Sartre's Flaubert', in Novel, vol. 6, no. 1, Fall 1972, pp. 79-83.

2 Lévi-Strauss has produced a four-volume work, with the overall title 'Mythologiques'. The English translation of this is 'The science of mythology.' The phrase explains Lévi-Strauss's approach to the study of myths through these four books.

It is necessary to emphasise the common factors between Lévi-Strauss and Sartre, to show that Sartre and modern anthropology share the same concerns, and that much of Sartre's analysis fits an anthropological pattern, although the models studied may be unusual. The following passage describes the correspondence between Lévi-Strauss and Sartre:

"At different times and in different places, both men have turned their attention to such questions as the relative centrality of the dialectic and analytic frames of investigation; the mechanics through which the distinctive features of a social and conceptual reality become cohesively integrated; the extent to which the thoughts and actions of a free man are constrained by the structures of his mind, his society and his physical environment; the ways in which language, social relations and alternative forms of logic reflect and bound the process of thought itself; and the question to what extent history may be regarded as a unique verification of fundamental principles of human existence rather than merely being one more expression of the structural regularities that pervade all of the human career."³

Whilst Sartre wanted a study which would cover all the aspects of a society, both structurally and culturally, Lévi-Strauss concentrated on the structuralist approach. After the publication of Critique de la raison dialectique, in 1960, the differences in approach to the study of man between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss became the centre of continuing debate. In The savage mind, Lévi-Strauss devoted the final chapter to 'History and dialectic'. Here, he took Sartre to task over theoretical inconsistencies in the Critique, which revolved around Sartre's definition of the terms 'dialectical reason' and 'history'. Whereas he himself saw the term dialectical reason as covering the perpetual efforts analytical reason made to reform itself when it aspired to account for language, society and thought, Lévi-Strauss thought that Sartre

3 Lawrence Rosen, 'Language, history and the logic of inquiry in the works of Lévi-Strauss', in The unconscious in culture; the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, New York, Dutton, 1974, p. 390.

vacillated between the two conceptions of dialectical and analytical reason. Whilst on the one hand he opposed dialectical and analytical reasons as truth and error, and almost as God and devil, at other times he apparently considered these two kinds of reason as complementary routes to the same truth⁴. Lévi-Strauss was, to a certain extent, justified in this criticism, as he was in his comments on the use of the term 'history':

"One is hard put to it to see whether it is meant to be the history men make unconsciously, the history of men consciously made by historians, the philosopher's interpretation of the history of men or his interpretation of the history of historians"⁵.

Sartre made indirect responses to these criticisms; but it was only in 1966, in an interview given to Les Cahiers de Philosophie, entitled 'L'Anthropologie'⁶, that he made his position on the study of man clear. He asserted that only a change in methods could give rise to a total study of man, and maintained that one should adopt an approach proving successful in the treatment of mentally handicapped children; that is, that one should treat the child, not as an object inserted into society, but as a developing concern, which changes with the passage of time, which is part of a larger process, and which is at the same time individual⁷. Structural analysis, he considered, gave one a false synthesis, for this type of anthropology merely presented a certain objective reflection. Sartre asserted that only

4 Lévi-Strauss, The savage mind, pp. 245-246.

5 Ibid, p. 250.

6 J-P. Sartre, 'L'Anthropologie', in Cahiers de philosophie, no. 2, 3 février, 1966. Later published in Situations IX.

7 Situations IX, p. 84.

philosophy can be said to make a dialectical study, because the historian or anthropologist is an historical being too, that is to say that he is 'situated' relative to the group he is studying. Philosophy begins at the moment when the dialectical relationship history/structure reveals to us that, in every case, man - taken as an actual member of a given society, and not as an abstract human nature - is only a quasi-object for man. Anthropology, as it stands, cannot bridge the gap between the actual person and abstract human nature, nor can linguistics, which separates meaning from the word, although Marxism might develop some other method of totalisation. Sartre described the moment when the complete picture is achieved:

"La compréhension, c'est, après l'étude du modèle, de voir le modèle en marche à travers l'histoire. Le moment de la compréhension totale serait le moment où l'on comprendrait le groupe historique par son langage et le langage par son groupe historique"⁸.

Sartre went on to emphasise the extent of his philosophical approach, drawing on examples from L'Idiot de la famille, which was at that time still in progress⁹. He pointed out that we learn about a man not just from what he does, but also from what he does not do, or refuses to do.

Sartre sees history as a recurring structure - man is the son of man. This attitude allows him to understand both continuity and discontinuity in the historical process, and to affirm that history is made finite by the

8 Ibid, p. 91.

9 Two lengthy articles appeared in Les Temps Modernes in 1965 and 1966.

number of humans in the historical series. It also allows him in part to accept Engels's statement that men make their own history on the basis of real prior conditions; for death may be considered a prior condition, and yet it is charged with human life and action. Since history is a recurring structure, Sartre has scope to relate and interrelate incidents, including the possibility of using contemporary events and his own experience to elucidate the past. In L'Être et le néant, he had argued that it was impossible to enter another man's skin to recapitulate the exact relationship between his actions and perceptions. In the Critique, the reader notes a shift of emphasis, for while Sartre still argued that it was impossible to completely enter the world of another person, particularly if that person were dead, he began to acknowledge that through a study of his own being, the writer could hope to elucidate the process by which man affects and is affected by his conception of reality.

L'Idiot de la famille claims a measure of empathy between Sartre and his subject, Flaubert, and lends weight to the argument that history is a recurring structure. In a discussion on the Second Empire, Sartre likens Louis Napoleon and his regime to the Roman Empire under Nero, a favourite symbol of his for oppressive regimes. Flaubert, similarly, seems to have been aware of historical parallels between events, for he saw in the invasion of France by the Germans in 1870 a re-enactment of the invasion by Attila the Hun¹⁰.

10 J-P. Sartre, L'Idiot de la famille, Paris, Gallimard, 1971-72, v. 3, p. 593.

Georges Balandier, a political anthropologist, asks¹¹: "What exactly is history?" He begins to answer his question by quoting from Evans-Pritchard's Anthropology and history, where Evans-Pritchard maintains that the debate will be resolved only if a clear distinction is made between the means of historical knowledge, the forms taken by historical development and the ideological expressions in which real history is clothed. Balandier sees a duality of historical expression: "a public history (unchanging in its general features and concerning a whole ethnic entity) which co-exists with a private history (defined in detail, subject to distortions, concerned with particular groups, and their specific interests)", and he criticises Sartre for maintaining that only a foreign history could be totally assimilated, or "interiorised". The evidence for this view is to be found throughout Sartre's writings relating to the Algerian crisis, and in L'Idiot de la famille in the section dealing with the life of Charles Leconte de Lisle. Briefly, Sartre believed that the native population, oppressed by the colonising power, interiorised the culture of their oppressors, and then reproduced aspects of this culture as weapons to oppose or destroy the imposed culture.

Sartre remained sceptical of some of the tenets of structuralism, for he sees that any structure imposed on man, including even History, may be limiting. For this reason too, he was suspicious of the historical determinism of classical Marxism, since it detracts from the freedom of the individual. His attitude towards history is summed up by Simone de Beauvoir:

11 Balandier, pp. 19-20.

"The historical whole at every moment determines our powers, it fixes limits to our field of action and to our real future, it conditions our attitude towards the possible and the impossible, the real and the imaginary, what is and what should be, time and space; after this we in turn determine our relations with others, that is, the meaning of our life and the value of our death; it is within these limits that our Me finally appears. It is history which shows some people a way out and causes others to mark time in front of closed doors"¹².

However, in spite of this scepticism, Sartre weaves into his writings a structuralism based on a similar concept to one accepted by Lévi-Strauss - that of the third or mediating party in any conceptual scheme. For Sartre, this 'third party' is external to the empirical subject matter, not being of the same order as that which is observed. As he explains in L'écrivain et sa langue¹³, we are inside language, rather than language being inside us; thus language may appear as property, and the user enters into a bourgeois relationship with it, if he uses language to communicate:

"Dans la prose, il y a réciprocité; dans la poésie, je pense que l'autre sert uniquement de révélateur. Je crois que le projet poétique n'implique pas la communication au même degré"¹⁴.

Structure, then, may be said to reside in the objectivity of the observer.

Sartre is concerned in L'Idiot de la famille with the form and content of society. The difference between structure and form is admirably described by the Russian formalist, Vladimir Propp: "Form is defined by opposition to content, which is foreign to it. But structure has no distinct content; it is the content itself apprehended in a logical organisation conceived as a

12 Cited in Raymond Aron, Marxism and the existentialists, New York, Harper and Row, 1969, p. 70.

13 An interview given to Pierre Verstraeten, 'L'écrivain et sa langue', published in Situations IX.

14 Ibid, p. 58.

property of the real." Sartre refers frequently to A. L. Kroeber's Anthropology, in particular to the section 'Ethos and eidos; form and content; values'¹⁵. He elaborates these ideas within the framework of Flaubert's artistic inspiration:

"Le flot boueux du quotidien ne s'organise pas de lui-même pour offrir au regard l'unité d'une essence ou d'un type: l'expérience ne présente que des ébauches; l'artiste est celui qui en dégage l'eidos par une triple élaboration de ces données, unifiant, isolant et radicalisant l'apport empirique"¹⁶.

This is quite close to Flaubert's own position which Sartre quotes later in the work:

"Les informations sont du domaine des signes, mais le sens d'un ouvrage de l'esprit nous est communiqué indirectement par sa beauté formelle"¹⁷.

Moving away from the sphere of the artistic, Sartre seems to apply the ethos/eidos argument to types of thinking. Sartre identifies two ways

15 "Greek eidos, from which we have "idol" as a derivative, denotes form or appearance or likeness. The eidos of a culture would therefore be its appearance. The Greek word ethos, from which we have 'ethics', denotes first of all disposition. With reference to a people, it means their ways or customs, corresponding nearly to Latin mores. Like that term, it carries an implication of what is sanctioned and expected It will be evident from these examples that ethos deals with qualities that pervade the whole culture - like a flavour - as contrasted with the aggregate of separable constituents that make up its formal appearance and are the eidos. The ethos includes the direction in which a culture is oriented, the things it aims at, prizes and endorses, and more or less achieves. We are here getting into metaphors that personify culture as if it had a will and a purpose of its own. That is a fault of the language of our day. Scientific thinking has penetrated so recently into these fields that it has failed as yet to work out its own more exact expressions." A. L. Kroeber, Anthropology, rev. ed, New York, Harcourt, Brace and New World Inc., 1948, pp. 293-4.

16 L'Idiot, p. 999.

17 Ibid, p. 1619.

of thinking; with the head and with the heart¹⁸. Thinking with the head is rational, it is logical and is recognised by its form. Thinking with the heart is irrational and is important for its content. Another aspect of the ethos/eidos argument is to be found in Sartre's insistence on the link between having and being, which on occasion seems to dominate the established notion of the link between doing and being when applied to Flaubert. In Critique de la raison dialectique, Sartre had posited 'need' as the motivating force in human relationships. He picks up this theme when he writes that for Flaubert: "Pour être, il faut avoir; et l'on est ce que l'on a: telle est la métaphysique du propriétaire, telle est celle de Gustave, propriétaire manqué"¹⁹; and he elaborates it in a discussion on the ability to live without living, to express eidos without ethos. "[La richesse] a délivré le riche de la nécessité; Flaubert rêve parfois qu'elle peut le délivrer du besoin même"²⁰, because desires fulfilled will continually deliver him from necessity, and eventually, the knowledge and anticipation of this fulfilment will take the place of the basic needs. This notion, stressing the ultimate uselessness of wealth and possessions, returns the reader to the notion of formal beauty, which also has neither substance nor use.

In the way he deals with the content of society, Sartre may be compared with the American anthropologist, Robert Redfield. L'Idiot de la famille conforms in many aspects to Redfield's description of the study of a small community²¹. For, in spite of its length and scope, it is not the study of

18 Ibid, p. 1067. 'Animus pense, anima palpite.'

19 Ibid, p. 1077.

20 Ibid, p. 1076.

21 Robert Redfield, The little community, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1960.

a large scale society; it is a study of the society of one man. The similarity in approach can be seen by comparing Sartre's view of the aim of anthropology with the sub-title to Redfield's The little community: 'Viewpoints for the study of a human whole'. Redfield emphasises the importance of the content of a given society at a number of levels. He suggests the need to view the 'little community' as a whole, as an ecological system and as a social structure; he considers the importance of setting a perspective through history on an appropriate time-scale and of seeing the 'little community' as a community within communities. In comparing Redfield's method of investigation with Sartre's, the reader is struck by the similarity in approach to biography as a necessary part of the study of any society. Redfield emphasises the importance of biography in the study of a 'little community'²², stating that in order to discuss a human life and its development it is necessary to tell of the changing states of mind of the person who lives that life, and that the biographic form should make it possible to study the influence upon men's actual lives of the ideas which may prevail in their society. Like Sartre, Redfield considers a study of the mind as it develops in infancy and childhood important, and concurs that the methodology of psychoanalysis seems to offer the clearest conceptions yet put forward²³. Finally, Sartre's writing implies complete agreement with Redfield's statement that "the social structure of a small community is a set of limiting conditions within which the conduct of individuals takes place"²⁴.

Kinship represents an important area of investigation for many anthropologists. The concern, here, is of the relationships of person to

22 Ibid, p. 59.

23 Ibid, p. 64.

24 Ibid, p. 46.

person. 'Social structure' is a term sometimes used to include this type of human relationship. Redfield comments²⁵ on the lack of precision with which this term is used, and cites²⁶ Professor Raymond Firth's interest in 'social alignment', 'the ordering of the personnel component of the community'.

Lévi-Strauss viewed kinship as systems of marital exchange. In these systems, he saw sets of rules, which, although they could be varied or modified, existed regardless of the individuals who enacted them and were, in their very constitution, limited in their operating procedures. He believed that these systems could only be discerned at a deep analytical level. Sartre, on the other hand, emphasised that each individual must make, at some level, the choice to remain in the group and abide by its rules, so that each person actually pledges his participation in a given marriage system rather than having it imposed on him.

In evaluating these radically different points of view, it is necessary to remember that Lévi-Strauss was trying, like many other anthropologists, to capture the last traditional moments of a people, whilst Sartre was investigating a society already in transition. He was keen to show, both in regard to Flaubert and to himself, that the ideas received by the child were not those of the parents, but of the grandparents, as in many peasant cultures. Gustave Flaubert's father, Achille-Cléophas, had been brought up in the country, the son of a veterinarian. Sartre claims that this implied, on his arrival in Rouen, that his attitudes were a generation behind those of

25 Ibid, p. 33.

26 Ibid, p. 34.

his contemporaries, and that thus his own children were to be brought up in a manner fitting to a past epoch. The proof of this argument is tenuous, given Achille-Cléophas' interest in science and progress. However, it is not so far-fetched to suggest that the school programme of the 1830's was inculcating, through literature primarily, ideas current before the Revolution. In a stable society, this type of education would obviously lead to a continuation of the status quo; in a society in transition, it is clear that such breaks in the transmission of ideas can only lead to a pendulum action between extremes of conservatism and extremes of progress. Disputes between father and son may give rise to an infringement of traditional values, and ultimately lead to a breakdown of society. Sartre discusses Flaubert's attitude towards the career his father chose for him:

"Il sera du barreau, puisque son père le veut, mais son être d'avocat sera la subversion instituée; comédien, il eût fait rire les autres; avocat, il leur reprendra le rire et les rendre risibles"²⁷.

In accordance with Sartre's belief in the primacy of action, the infringement of the group's rules must occur through deliberate action to break them, rather than through an inertia which fails to observe them. Thus he states that for Flaubert to tear himself away from his bourgeois milieu, he must find a way which will allow him to appear 'inhuman', at the same time as it allows him to remain a man. Flaubert was to find this alienation through beauty:

"le Beau, aliénation des hommes à une fin inhumaine, est d'abord l'aliénation de l'Artiste à son Art. Cette aliénation rigide est, pense Gustave, sa libération de l'être-de-classe."²⁸

27 L'Idiot, p. 881.

28 Ibid, p. 1487.

Sartre discusses the contradiction inherent in Flaubert's attitude towards his family situation - the tension between his desire to stay, to maintain both his youth and the family tradition, and his desire to break away completely. He suggest that Flaubert's debilitating nervous illness was at least a provisional way to remain in the bosom of his family, and that his desire to be feminine was an affirmation of this desire to remain protected²⁹. And yet, in 1840, Flaubert had already discovered, with some terror, that the artist, in his own way, is a man of action. Sartre demonstrates the strength of this contradiction in a brilliant discussion of Kafka's story, The Metamorphosis, where the reader is made painfully aware of the desire to change, and equally of the fear of change and the desire to remain the same³⁰.

Many societies include in their relations between individuals a type of contact known as 'joking relationships'. Radcliffe-Brown defines a joking relationship as a 'peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism'³¹, a kind of permitted disrespect. This permits contact which would otherwise be forbidden within the society. Sartre goes to great lengths to show that Flaubert and his schoolmates had such a relationship with their teachers and other elders, through a character which they created and named Le Garçon. It was generally acknowledged that Le Garçon was Flaubert's creation, although any of the boys in the group could slip into the role, giving him the opportunity to infringe the normal social conventions, usually at the expense of the other person. One may wonder at the three hundred page section on Le Garçon, questioning its importance within the text; it is indeed not until volume three that the

29 Ibid, p. 1675.

30 Ibid, p. 1762.

31 A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Structure and function in primitive society, London, Cohen and West, 1952, p. 90.

the reader is fully aware of the significance of the existence of a joking relationship. Here, Sartre deals with Flaubert's relationship to the Second Empire, and in particular to Louis Napoleon. Flaubert seems to see in the Second Empire a re-enactment both of the First Empire, and also of the situation before the Revolution, although he is also aware that the Second Empire situation is a travesty which degrades these previous regimes; Louis Napoleon is a feeble impersonation of Napoleon Bonaparte. Sartre also claims that Flaubert identified with Louis Napoleon:

"Louis Bonaparte . . . lui paraît plus divertissant. Pour une curieuse raison: il croit voir en lui une incarnation du Garçon"³².

"Ou peut-être, c'est une réincarnation de Néron, cet empereur cruel dont Flaubert s'est plu si souvent à jouer le rôle, par sadisme, faisant d'un froncement de sourcils, rouler des têtes imaginaires. Dans les événements qui précèdent le coup d'Etat, ce jeune homme enragé ne voit qu'une vaste entreprise de démoralisation nationale et d'avilissement du genre humain"³³.

The relative values of science and myth, knowledge and belief, have been discussed in innumerable academic papers. Lévi-Strauss's attitude to science and myth is expressed by anthropologist Stanley Diamond³⁴:

"For Lévi-Strauss science represents a superior myth, it not only presumes to be, but actually is closer to the truth, the 'myth of myth', since science can reveal myth, but myth cannot explicate science. Thus, Lévi-Strauss, at one stroke rationalises myth and mystifies rationality."

To this attitude, he contrasted Sartre's study on anti-Semitism, Réflexions sur la question juive, written in 1946. Here he found an argument which is "directed against all hyper-rational analytic, abstract, reductive and scientific modes of conceiving the world"³⁵.

32 L'Idiot, v. 3, p. 455.

33 L'Idiot, v. 3, p. 456.

34 Stanley Diamond, 'The myth of structuralism', in The unconscious in culture, p. 303.

35 Ibid, p. 324.

In L'Idiot de la famille the opposition between scientism and faith is, in one way or another, pervasive. There is no clear cut acceptance of the one over the other, for as Sartre writes about Flaubert: "he never stopped confusing Knowledge and Faith, Belief and Affirmation." Although Sartre considers this confusion a sign of the times, as well as the opposition of masculine and feminine natures, in the main he relates directly to Flaubert's experiences. He takes Scientism, a manifestation of a masculine nature, as referring to the attitude of Flaubert's father, Achille-Cléophas, an up-and-coming bourgeois, and Faith, a manifestation of a feminine nature, as referring to the attitude of his mother, a member of the aristocracy. The science of his father was readily visible; dissection of cadavers appears as a kind of analysis. In the same way that the body is matter and can be cut up, so too, presumably, can the soul be dissected. Although all the Flaubert children were familiar with this form of analysis, Sartre claims that Gustave never witnessed a synthesis (interpreted as the sewing up of a dissected corpse) and thus he was left with an incomplete picture of the analytical, objective nature of science.

Given the choice, Sartre says, between Religion and Science, Flaubert would obviously choose Science:

"Ce qu'il demande à L'Eglise est plus subtile: il ne s'agit pas de se jeter contre la mécanique newtonienne comme Don Quichotte contre les moulins à vent; encore moins de multiplier les miracles truqués pour nous faire voir Dieu sur terre, puisqu'il n'y est pas et que les lois de la Nature n'y sont jamais suspendues. Non: son problème est plus profond, c'est celui de toute une génération qui veut réagir contre le jacobinisme de ses pères mais se trouve jetée dans des difficultés nouvelles par l'enrichissement du Savoir: comment garder ou retrouver la Foi tout en absorbant la Science expérimentale?"³⁶

And yet, emphasising the confusion he claimed belonged to Flaubert, Sartre later states that Faith belonged to the non-reader and the illiterate³⁷, when he had already established that Gustave was a non-reader. He continues to emphasise the fact that Flaubert seems to cling to the ideology of his mother. On a secular level, this leads him to consider the way in which the state was constituted, and to believe in the divine right of kings; this was proof for Flaubert of the generosity of God, passing his goodness through the monarch to the people, who returned a loving obedience to God through their obedience to their king. On a religious level, Sartre endows Flaubert with the belief that he may take the place of Absolute Power. Although he never fully substantiates his tentative claim that Flaubert saw himself in the place of God³⁸, Sartre goes on to construct a kind of moral terrain, where rising and falling, or ascending and descending have an obsessive polarity for Flaubert, and are used as classificatory principles. However, he imposes a topsy-turvy absurdity on this world, expressing the view that descent to the lowest level is in fact arrival at the highest point, and that one climbs in order to fall back. Sartre indicates that Flaubert had always shown an interest in vertical groupings. The quality of his family to him meant that he should always occupy a privileged position. However, at school this seemed not to be the case, for his school fellows excelled. Therefore, in Sartre's view, Flaubert concluded that to be on top can equal failure or evil :

"à partir de 1835, le Diable est toujours en haut et, du coup, il emporte au Zénith ses victimes; ainsi l'élévation diabolique est équivalente à la tentation qui, sous les plumes chrétiennes, fait succomber et choir."³⁹

37 Ibid, pp. 584-585.

38 Ibid, p. 595.

39 Ibid, p. 1184.

Taking up this point, Sartre conceives the notion of what he calls Flaubert's 'negative verticality':

"cette posture qui l'attire - s'étendre sur le dos, écrasé, réduit à l'impuissance - symbolise à ses yeux, sans qu'il puisse le déclarer explicitement, le retour à sa première enfance . . . "40

However, the term implies more than the feminine weakness of fainting fits or hysteria. To explain this, Sartre introduces one of Flaubert's very early stories, Quidquid volueris. Here, Flaubert himself uses the opposing notions of being lifted up to fall - an eagle carries off a young person, who is subsequently ravished on a mountain-top - "assomption et pâmouison s'opposent: c'est monter pour choir"⁴¹. A sexual element is thus introduced. Sartre's implicit suggestion is that through his 'negative verticality' Flaubert refuses to accept his responsibility as male. The opposition of masculine and feminine, active and passive elements, has been a factor of Sartre's writing from the very beginning, and is used here to quite good effect to denote Flaubert as a passive figure in Sartre's philosophical terms.

Sartre has not only constructed an anthropological study on contemporary lines, he has also incorporated Kant's advice to use world history, biography, plays and novels as important tools for anthropological study. The early sections of volume three draw attention to French history in the nineteenth century, linking what Balandier called 'public history' to Flaubert's private life. Sartre also allows discussion, indirectly, of contemporary events, for example the Algerian crisis, which had preoccupied him during the late '50's and early '60's, and he

40 Ibid, p. 594.

41 Quoted in L'Idiot, p. 44.

includes slogans and comments from the student upheavals in France in May 1968. Here too, to strengthen the picture Sartre has painted of nineteenth century French society, he offers the reader a study of Leconte de Lisle, Flaubert's contemporary by birth and social standing.

It is perhaps in his own comments and in the comments projected through the literary characterisation of Flaubert, on the subject of plays and novels, that Sartre goes furthest in fulfilling Kant's advice. He draws a telling parallel between one of his own characters and Gustave:

"l'enfant et le comédien ont la même impuissance et les mêmes visées. A cette différence près que Kean ne ressent pas réellement la peur qu'il représente au lieu que Gustave est convaincu d'exprimer ce qu'il ressent."⁴²

Statements on the works of writers such as Zola, Musset, Théophile Gautier and the Goncourts are generally pertinent, and his careful study of the reading habits of Gustave Flaubert is fascinating, both for what it expresses about Flaubert as well as for what it implies about Sartre. Through his interest in Kant's philosophy, Sartre has added another dimension to his anthropological study.

It is therefore possible to evaluate L'Idiot de la famille against criteria set by some of the world's leading anthropologists. Even though the overall perspective is philosophical, the study remains valid as an anthropological investigation, for it examines those aspects of society acknowledged as fundamental to any ethnography. At the level of the information gathered, the picture is somewhat different. A close examination

42 Ibid, p. 669.

of the facts Sartre deals with in his attempt to found an anthropology reveals that the information is based on imagination rather than empiricism. This need not, however, prevent L'Idiot de la famille from being considered an anthropological investigation, in the same way that the works of Carlos Castaneda, almost certainly works of the imagination, are considered by some reviewers to be fine examples of ethnography⁴³.

43 Richard de Mille, Castaneda's journey: the power and the allegory, Santa Barbara, Capra Press, 1976.

THE SOLITARY INDIVIDUAL; THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

1. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

The second facet of the prism to be investigated in this study is the situation of the solitary individual, both in the real and symbolic worlds. Sartre's main aim, in volumes I and II of L'Idiot de la famille, is to discover the way in which a person's identity is produced. He no longer contends that man has utter freedom of choice over his destiny, but allows of a certain determination :

"Les préjugés du milieu ont pour effet de limiter les possibilités tout autant que la volonté tenace de monter les élargira. Par toutes ces raisons . . . un enfant, bien avant de naître, est désigné par un certain champ de possibles assez restreint et fort nettement organisé qui lui reflète les besoins sociaux définis par sa classe, à travers les options de groupes décisives et, finalement, à travers la volonté de son père"¹.

Sartre does, however, distinguish between men who have been formed as a result of deliberately committed actions - men forged by history, who crush the child they once were - and men who accepted their 'prehistory'². He seems to condemn the latter, including amongst them, Gustave Flaubert, whilst maintaining that he himself belongs to the former.

A person cannot operate within society unless he acts with one identity. Sartre recognises that Flaubert found it very difficult to establish his own concept of 'self', and examines this problem in detail in the First Book of the Second Part of L'Idiot de la famille - 'What is the Beautiful if not the Impossible?' (pp. 653-1107), specifically in the section 'He and I'. Sartre suggests that Flaubert's solution was to move through the realm of imaginary situations to the point where he became an

1 L'Idiot, p. 1477.

2 Ibid, p. 55.

actor. For Flaubert, to be real is to be believed. This coincides with the view of self-hood expressed by Abner Cohen:

"Selfhood is achieved by man when he interacts with other men with the totality of his personality. In the performance of a single, highly specialised, contractual role, the totality of the self is least involved. On the other hand, maximum involvement of the self is achieved through non-contractual, non-utilitarian roles and activities in symbolic action. As Morris (1972) puts it: 'People are at their most individual and personal when they engage in drama.'"³

In Cohen's book, Two-dimensional man, he argues that the individual is motivated by two types of forces, which he names political and symbolic. These are forces which also structure society. Power is generally seen to reside in the political (including economic) institutions; the importance of the symbolic institutions, however, is not to be underestimated for these include kinship, and religion and ritual. Cohen maintains that in any society both the individual and society as a whole recognise these forces, and in a stable situation keep them at all times separate. He discusses the identity of the individual, and the ways in which both the political and the symbolic afford sources of power to the individual. Similarly, in L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre investigates the identity of the individual, dealing with both political and symbolic structures, tightly interweaving the two orders. The reader is frequently uneasy as Sartre violates one of the principles of societal organisation which Cohen takes as fundamental - that the political and symbolic aspects of society should maintain their integrity.

Whether dealing with political or symbolic man, Sartre examines society at the level of the individual. In his approach, traces of the

3 Abner Cohen, Two-dimensional man, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 55.

influence of Dilthey are recognisable, particularly in his formulation of the notion that social-historical reality consists of individual human beings, who alone think, feel and act, and so produce languages, religions and institutions. More marked is the influence of Max Weber. His statements on what is known as 'action theory' could easily have been Sartre's:

"Interpretive sociology considers the individual and his action as the basic unit, as its 'atom'. . . The individual is . . . the upper limit and the sole carrier of meaningful conduct . . . Such concepts as 'state', 'association', 'feudalism' and the like, designate certain categories of human interaction. Hence it is the task of sociology to reduce these concepts to 'understandable' action, that is, without exception, to the actions of participating individuals."⁴

Sartre, however, goes much further than the transactionalists, who, as George Herbert Mead did, would argue that a man's very self-identity is formed through inter-action with other men. His social theory is constructed in ways which make it impossible to understand social relations, for it is not built on a sense of society at all, but on abstract, isolated individuals. Even though in L'Idiot de la famille, he goes some way towards accepting that man is in a dialectical relationship with society, an entity in itself, yet the theory poses an intellectual problem. Sartre's social relations are not truly social; he takes society as a group of people, working separately, and contends that to produce a more complex society, one need only add more people.

Sartre's concern with the position of the solitary individual in society implies acknowledgement of alienation. This is fundamental to

4 From Max Weber: essays in sociology, New York, Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 55.

L'Idiot de la famille. His concept of alienation is not that as suffered by the industrial working class, but as imposed by their social and political condition on the middle classes. . . Sartre had been working out this view since L'être et le néant; during his involvement with the Algerian war, he expressed it succinctly in the Preface to Albert Memmi's The coloniser and the colonised. Here, he proposed that 'No one can treat a man like a dog without first regarding him as a man. The impossible dehumanisation of the oppressed . . . becomes the alienation of the oppressor. It is the oppressor himself who restores, with his slightest gesture, the humanity he seeks to destroy; and since he destroys humanity in others, he regards it everywhere as his enemy. To handle this, the coloniser must assume the opaque rigidity and imperviousness of stone. In short he must dehumanise himself as well.' Thus the middle classes may be responsible for their own alienation; a consequence of this alienation may be hatred. Sartre maintains, in L'Idiot de la famille, that a man's relationship with another man may be defined as a reciprocity of hatred, which is 'the true mediation of the upper classes'. If, Sartre states, the dominant relationship is not one of reciprocal hatred, then it will become a complicity of hatred against a third person, considered as a representative of the human race⁵. This statement would seem to suggest that insofar as men do share in their social relations, this is only a possibility for the upper classes.

Readers have come to expect Sartre's attacks on the bourgeois state; none has been quite so ingenious as that set out in L'Idiot de la famille, where one is never quite sure whether one is reading the ideas of Flaubert, the ideas of Sartre writing as though he were Flaubert or the ideas of

5 L'Idiot, v. 3, p. 335.

Sartre writing as himself. Without even mentioning the bourgeoisie, Sartre launches an attack through his picturing of Flaubert's father, whom he postulates as an acknowledged member of the bourgeoisie. He describes Flaubert's relations with his father as feudal: that is to say, the link between men is that of giver and receiver, with Flaubert as vassal, or receiver. Thus both men are removed from their class of origin and related to a regime which the elder would have abhorred. Sartre expands on this notion, when he asserts that Flaubert believed his rightful place was above others, a place which should not be acquired, but bestowed. Thus he is able to substantiate Flaubert's adherence to a hereditary monarchy, which was based on a belief in the divine right of kings. Again this attitude attacks the bourgeois state, as it places reliance on super-human powers. Sartre points out that the fall of the Bourbons destroyed Flaubert's dream of an extraordinary society, but it built up its own myth, founded on resentment, that of the undiscoverable Aristocracy⁶. Even if the presence of superior beings was not apparent, nevertheless, their existence was recognised.

On a similar theme, Sartre notes that through his correspondence, Flaubert expressed a desire to be fabulously wealthy. Not once did he mention the possibility of making money, for the only admissible wealth was that which was inherited. As a consumer, Flaubert would live on his patrimony, refusing to add to it himself. It was not that he was unaware of the origins of the money - be it earned by blood or by sweat - but that the transmission of money from father to son ennobled it.

6 Ibid, p. 605.

Sartre, in his attempts to show the establishment of Flaubert's identity in the political, or real world, continually brings the reader to the symbolic or imagined world. Even the attack on the bourgeois father/son relationship is transposed to another class, and discussed as a feudal relationship.

Flaubert's comprehension of the political regimes under which he lived shows an uncomfortable mingling of external reality and imagined reality, the political and the symbolic. It was not until the Second Empire and the accession to the throne of Louis Napoleon that Flaubert really understood the government of his country. He recognised the situation, including Louis Napoleon, as imaginary - a reconstruction of the Empire under Napoleon Bonaparte. And yet it was real because the French people believed in it. Flaubert had something in common with this emperor/impostor. He saw traits of his own character in Louis Napoleon - the sadistic, demoralising streak, representing his heroes de Sade and Nero. He saw him as an incarnation of Le Garçon, the joking relationship figure created in his boyhood. Flaubert then was justified in his symbolic level of existence, and could even hope to be acclaimed on a political level.

Sartre also examined Flaubert in Cohen's 'non-contractual, non-utilitarian roles'. He claims that, because he is so unsure of his own identity, Flaubert opts for anti-Cartesianism, and for irrationality.

"S'il ne parvient qu'à produire des images, n'est-ce pas qu'il est lui-même une image?"⁷

7 Ibid, p. 677.

In fact, Sartre says, Flaubert is not sure that he even exists. The most he can do is to believe that others believe in him, but that this uncertainty is revealed whenever he says 'Moi, je . . . '. Moi refers to the unity of the innumerable faces he unwittingly offers to others; je is the subject of praxis and of all affirmation⁸. This is a flimsy shred of evidence even though there are others to strengthen the case. Sartre would seem to imply that those who use this fairly common speech pattern may be suffering from an identity crisis.

He states early in L'Idiot de la famille that without a knowledge of early childhood, one cannot even say that the biographer is building on sand; he is building on mist, with fog⁹. The reader might easily feel that basing the constitution of a man's personality on an interpretation of a common speech pattern falls into the same mould. However, Sartre continues to build on the mist. He notes that as Flaubert's personality developed, creating the dichotomy between He and I, the loss of identity worsened. One is aware of the influence of the early Freudian notion of the Ego and the Id. Sartre moves farther into a symbolic order, by equating 'He' with the figure of the Sadistic Lord and 'I' with the Masochistic Child.

Barnes¹⁰ comments that Sartre makes sexuality as basic to human existence as Freud does. For Freud, movement of the libido is determined from the start by the biological characteristics inherent in a particular sex, and these influence the total personality structure. For Sartre, sexual desire is a desire for a body, a wish to possess the Other as flesh,

8 Ibid, p. 673.

9 Ibid, p. 55.

10 Barnes, p. 61.

but is certainly not the desire to possess the body as a thing. It is the desire to trap consciousness in the body, so that what one possesses is not simply body, but embodied consciousness. Throughout L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre refers to Flaubert and his sexuality. He links it with Flaubert's alienation, allowing him a way to transcend this alienation by bestowing a value on himself:

"Aliéné par principe, il cherche à vivre cette alienation sous la forme sexuelle pour charger de convoitise les froids regards qui le transpercent, pour donner une ardeur secrète aux mains qui la reconstituent: il serait, du moins, valorisé comme objet de convoitise."¹¹

This sexuality was one of the ways in which Sartre sees Flaubert as imposing himself on those around him. For, whilst love may lead to masochism, sexual desire may bring one to sadism. According to Sartre, Flaubert admired the sadistic. Sartre quotes a letter from Flaubert to Ernest Chevalier, written in 1838, in which he praised highly Rabelais and Byron,

"les deux seuls qui aient écrit dans l'intention de nuire au genre humain et de lui rire à la face. Quelle immense position que celle d'un homme ainsi placé devant le monde."¹²

Flaubert is shown as wishing to emulate his heroes, his attitude being curiously intertwined with the notion of ascent and descent. Sartre takes it for granted that Flaubert only wanted fame and glory in order to avenge himself on his father:

"Mais il prétend obtenir [la gloire] en faisant rire de soi. C'est convoiter la gloire infamante des bouffons. N'est-ce pas s'écarter de son intention primitive? Peut-il vouloir à la fois faire l'orgueil et la honte de sa famille ou plus exactement, illustrer le nom de son père en le déshonorant."¹³

11 L'Idiot, p. 686.

12 Ibid, p. 1211.

13 Ibid, p. 831.

Whatever Flaubert's motives for wanting public acclaim, he found himself again faced by the dichotomy of the personal and the public, the symbolic and the political, an extension of the notion of He and I. Sartre draws our attention to the fact that at the same time as Flaubert received public acclaim for Madame Bovary, the public prosecutor instituted proceedings against him. Sartre notes that this merely confirmed Flaubert's attitude that power was vested in Art. It is clear how this episode incorporated elements of the symbolic and political aspects of man.

This idea, however, seems to be as much one of Sartre's own. He discusses at length in volume 3 the power of literature, its place in society and the duty of the artist, and his arguments may be stated as follows: literature structures the bourgeoisie by creating, little by little, the key parts of its ideology; each ruling class wants its own literature; the author should write so that his finished work constitutes an act.

This exposition helps to clarify Sartre's insistence on the power of art and the supremacy of the artist in volumes I and II. He comments that Flaubert was aware that the artist had to remain aloof from life, because if he became caught up in life, he ceased to see it clearly, and also that "nous autres, les artistes, nous sommes les aristocrates du bon Dieu"¹⁴. Literature would then not only give Flaubert a way of not being a bourgeois, it would give him entry into an élite¹⁵.

14 Ibid, p. 1103.

15 Ibid, p. 1601.

Sartre's philosophy of literature allows him to see the writer as a man of action, and to emphasise that the pen is mightier than the sword¹⁶. He cleverly contrasts, through Flaubert's eyes, a great writer with a great soldier:

"Or, c'est [Shakespeare] ce géant des lettres que Gustave compare tranquillement et malicieusement à son pire ennemi, Napoléon III. Par-dessus le marché, celui-ci a réussi en politique une oeuvre originale que l'autre eût pu créer en littérature s'il avait su se résumer, ne jamais quitter le terrain littéraire. La supériorité, en ce parallèle, revient donc à l'empereur. Pas tout à fait: l'art de manier les hommes est de toute manière tellement inférieur à celui de manier les mots qu'il vaut mieux être un Hugo qui manque parfois sa vraie cible qu'un Bonaparte qui fait mouche à tous les coups.¹⁷"

This comparison allows Flaubert to develop his own political idea - that of the power of the individual, which is essentially diabolic, and on principle anti-bourgeois.

Many critics have accused Sartre of formulating a godless theology; whilst he sought to do away with God, he in fact put man in God's place. In French thought from Descartes to Durkheim, perfect freedom belonged to God alone. Sartre, from his interpretation of the Cartesian phrase, 'cogito ergo sum', was totally unable to accept this. Therefore, he set out, in the Critique, an amplification of an idea previously set down in L'être et le néant, that since man was a thinking creature and responsible for his own destiny, he was faced by only two moral possibilities, which Sartre named sadism and masochism. (These notions were derived from his wartime experience, when the only choice Sartre saw was between collaboration and resistance.) In outlining these moral possibilities, he says that only sadism could be in good faith:

16 Ibid, p. 1403. "[L'Art] n'a d'autre mission que de rendre vain le sacrifice de l'Homme - c'est-à-dire du militaire."

17 Ibid, v. 3, p. 457.

"The necessary violence of the party corresponded to the necessary violence of the existentially free individual, and was the only alternative to masochistic capitulation."¹⁸

Raymond Aron, however, detects a Pascalian atmosphere in Sartre's writing, which carries through from L'Être et le néant. He reads Sartre as accepting that the essential theme of philosophy is the relation of the solitary individual either to God or to the absence of God. This reading would seem to be substantiated in L'Idiot de la famille, by passages such as :

"Gustave ne décidera jamais explicitement si la place d'honneur dans cet Empyrée inférieur est réservée à un hôte absentéiste et rechigné mais qui existe ou si, en supposant qu'il n'existe pas, c'est à lui-même de se hausser jusqu'au trône et de s'y asseoir par la raison que le mouvement ascensionnel a, en soi, une valeur sacrée."¹⁹

Sartre's philosophy of literature would seem to place the writer in direct communication with God; for inspiration, formerly, came from God. Hugo, for example, still claimed divine inspiration. However, Sartre claims, when Flaubert adopted the same notion, the idea reflected a certain madness. Men of the nineteenth century had questioned the existence of God, and many, influenced by science and technological inventions, denied His existence. Flaubert the writer felt the need to communicate; had he been a Hugo, his communication might have been with God. As it was, acknowledging the possible absence of God, Gustave's communication might then be with himself.

Flaubert lived a great deal through situations created in his imagination. To be justified in this existence, he merely needed other people to believe him and to believe in him. Then, he could become 'eternal,

18 Quoted by Raymond Aron in History and the dialectic of violence, p. 6.

19 L'Idiot, p. 595.

omnipresent', he could look at the world from the 'point of view of the Absolute'²⁰. Sartre emphasises the imaginary nature of Flaubert's relationship with his father:

"pour créer ce Seigneur imaginaire, Achille-Cléophas a fourni tous les matériaux - puissance et gloire, autorité, savoir universel, prépotence capricieuse, injuste justice - il n'a été besoin que de les porter à l'absolu."²¹

Flaubert's fantasies were thus founded on a sort of external reality.

Sartre has made the reader question whether Flaubert ever existed in the real world, that is, whether he acted on 'political' institutions. In his discussion of power, he has shown how, to a certain extent, power for Flaubert resided in the sexual. He demonstrates how Flaubert admired the sadistic nature of others, and sought himself to be sadistic through his sexuality. Yet it was precisely through his sexuality that he was also masochistic. Beginning with his relationship with his mother, Sartre shows how Flaubert's masochism had its origins in his passive acceptance of the care of her hands. This relationship also showed that something was missing in Gustave's make up. His mother had wanted a daughter, and Gustave was lacking in the essential female quality. Through the power of imagination, he did his best to endow himself with feminine qualities. Referring to a process he described in his autobiography, where bestowing a name conferred qualities associated with that name, in other words, where a 'symbolic' action has a result in the 'political' world, Sartre discusses Flaubert's wish to be female:

20 Ibid, p. 1561.

21 Ibid, p. 1893.

"Certes, il peut griffonner - il l'a fait - sur un bout de papier: 'Je voudrais être femme', mais cela ne le mènera pas loin. Comment jouir du 'deuxième sexe' à moins de se créer femme par les mots, avec un nom de femme, une vie, des moeurs, une condition, un destin de femme."²²

According to Sartre, power would seem, for Flaubert, to reside in the feminine, partly because being female represented a condition desired by others, but also because Flaubert saw it as a motive force precipitating action. To disentangle the tortuous logic Sartre uses, it is essential to recall his belief that the feminine element is the passive, that to accept passivity is to accept failure, and that the masculine element is the active. Sartre claimed that "l'amante dédaignée prend sa revanche en se faisant le géniteur de son aimé: l'écriture est la virilité de Gustave"²³. In other words, the feminine element becomes dominant, and produces a literary act, which may be seen as failure, a refusal to act, in the real world.

Nonetheless, writing does constitute an action in the real world. Sartre considers this 'femininity' destructive, because the decision to act through the imagination and literature prevents man from acting directly on the real world. He expands on this notion of the destructive nature of the feminine, in an attempt to add a further dimension to his explanation of the failure of the Second Empire. Sartre suggests that, for Flaubert, the feminine element which brought about the downfall of the Second Empire had two aspects; the first is an animal quality dominant over all class and breeding, exemplified in the following quotation:

22 Ibid, p. 951.

23 Ibid, p. 1089.

"D'une certaine manière, si l'on en croit Flaubert, la femme est une bête dressée qui joue un rôle ou, si l'on préfère, c'est une femelle en perpétuelle instance de déréalisation. Sous la 'grande dame catholique', sous la 'bourgeoise' et sous la 'lorette' qui ne sont que des rôles nous retrouvons le même animal exaspérant et borné. Pour aller jusqu'au bout toute grande dame est fausse, comme sont fausses les bonnes bourgeoises et les catins; et n'importe quelle femelle selon les circonstances, sera Eugénie ou la Païva ou la femme du grand frère Achille. Seules seront vraies les "bonnes filles" truculentes comme Lagier qui, loin de la dissimuler, tirent leur génie de l'exhibition de leur animalité: celles-là font horreur sous l'Empire parce que la Femme règne et qu'elle interdit, de crainte qu'on ne la démasque, tout abandon à la nature, toute recherche de la vérité."²⁴

The second is linked to the notion that faith is a female characteristic, and that in the context of Flaubert's society, faith automatically meant belief in Catholicism. By associating Catholicism, the Church and Woman, Sartre is able to demonstrate how Flaubert might have believed woman responsible for the fall of the Empire:

"Car la fable du monde, chez la femme, cet imaginaire souillé qu'elle prend ou veut prendre pour la réalité, c'est le catholicisme . . . La boucle est bouclée: c'est l'Eglise qui a perdu la France, c'est elle, la vaincue de Sedan; c'est la femme, complice par essence du parti-prêtre, qui a perdu l'Empereur."²⁵

The parallel between the failure of Flaubert, because of his belief in the feminine, and the failure of Louis Napoleon for what Sartre sees as fundamentally the same reason, serves as a further link between the two men, and allows Sartre to state with some conviction that "de mêmes motivations historiques ont produit ces deux épiphénomènes"²⁶.

24 Ibid, v. 3, p. 619.

25 Ibid, v. 3, p. 621.

26 Ibid, v. 3, p. 651.

Sartre would like the reader to believe that he has objectively (and imaginatively) studied the society in which Flaubert lived, and that he has been able to present the operations of that society through the actions of individuals. However, he cannot be said to have achieved this aim. All societies contain two types of institutions - political and symbolic. Power relations and symbolic formations, as Cohen points out, are not reducible one to the other; they interact, each having its own intrinsic values. A close examination of Sartre's study of Flaubert and his social milieu will reveal that Sartre did not maintain the autonomy of the two systems. His political system is based in his symbolic system. When all is said and done, the work revolves around the relationship between Flaubert and God, or the absence of God, and Flaubert's process of identification with the Godhead²⁷. Sartre has Flaubert play both the role of the humble servant and the Almighty quite successfully. This is brought out succinctly in the chapter and section headings of L'Idiot de la famille, as well as in frequently used phrases. 'Loser wins', for example, not only sums up Flaubert's manner of being outstanding; it also repeats the biblical notion of 'the last shall be first' and 'blessed is the lowly for his is the kingdom of heaven'. Furthermore, the notion of 'loser wins' is linked with the ambiguous term 'hypostasis', which in metaphysics is applied to an underlying substance but which in theology is used to refer to the personality of Christ, or the person of the Godhead. Thus, once again, an action or series of actions in the real world is seen to stem from a belief in the symbolic order.

27 Ibid, p. 595.

In all his writings, Sartre has attempted to place emphasis on the active. The heroes in his literary works are men who act, who have the courage of their convictions; the same is true of the men he highlights in his political works. In L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre again attempts to base the constitution of man's identity in real or political action; the reader soon becomes aware that the enterprise is doomed to failure. Sartre cannot hope to show Flaubert (or any man within this work) acting in the real world, because the work itself is based in a denial of reality; he ultimately imagines many of the circumstances which allow his Flaubert to act. Therefore, it can be seen that Sartre's Flaubert is at least as guilty of the denial of reality with which Sartre charged Gustave Flaubert; thus Sartre himself is guilty. Flaubert, however, did act, in that he created works of literature which are generally considered highly successful. We may remember that Sartre saw literary creation as failure, because it constituted a passive role. However, it suffices to consider the success of Sartre's own literary works, above all artistically, and to bear in mind that he often remarked on L'Idiot de la famille as his last great literary work, to become aware of the fact that Sartre himself had much the same desire as Flaubert - to create works of literature. The difference between the creative acts of these writers is that Sartre, according to his own philosophy, was aware that writing constituted a kind of failure; and yet, this 'failure' itself may be the desired end and its achievement - that is, the perfect execution of a passive action, or of an action in the imagined world - success.

THE THEFT OF LANGUAGE; SARTRE, FLAUBERT AND COMMUNICATION

L'Idiot de la famille is an exposition of Sartre's views on language, and in particular the language of praxis. He discusses in detail the use of language, 'commitment' and the difference in levels of communication between the prose writer and the poet. He also investigates the reading process, which he sees as interacting dialectically with the writing process.

Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, written when Sartre was intensely concerned with political commitment and action, demonstrated his belief in the primacy of action in all fields. In the twenty-five years between its publication and the appearance of the third volume of L'Idiot de la famille, he modified his position slightly, within the framework of his philosophy, but the insistence on the need for commitment remained. Qu'est-ce que la littérature? shows clearly the influence of Marxism-Leninism. Sartre's demand that style in prose should be unobtrusive, and his expectation that good prose should be aesthetically pleasing, are reminiscent of the views of Marx himself. The assertion that prose alone is a valid form of expression is founded in Lenin's 1905 pronouncement on party literature, which gave the writer an important role to play in society¹. Sartre emphasised this point when he wrote² that the function of the writer was to make sure that no one was ignorant of the world around him, and that no one could say it did not concern him. The reader is, however, also aware of the influence of Trotsky's rather more Romantic

1 V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, v. 10, pp. 44-49, "Party organisation and party literature."

2 Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, p. 74.

views³; this influence is evidenced by the fact that Sartre, even in this work, concedes the value of the artistic act. Trotsky had insisted on the importance of literature in any established society. He had stated that artistic creations flourished only in times of peace and prosperity. In particular, he felt that the writer, like all revolutionaries, had to be engaged in perpetual revolution. In Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, Sartre took up these points:

"L'écrivain consomme et ne produit pas, même s'il a décidé de servir par la plume les intérêts de la communauté . . . Il ne peut en aller différemment, car son activité est inutile: il n'est pas du tout utile, il est parfois nuisible que la société prenne conscience d'elle-même. . . L'écrivain présente [à la société] son image, il la somme de l'assumer ou de se changer . . . Ainsi l'écrivain donne à la société une conscience malheureuse, de ce fait il est en perpétuel antagonisme avec les forces conservatrices qui maintiennent l'équilibre qu'il tend à rompre. Car le passage au médiat qui ne peut se faire que par négation de l'immédiat est une perpétuelle révolution"⁴.

L'Idiot de la famille is fundamentally concerned with Flaubert's project, his commitment to be a writer, and touches indirectly on the points mentioned above. Sartre conceded in Qu'est-ce que la littérature?⁵ that the poet could be committed:

"Si donc l'on veut absolument parler de l'engagement du poète, disons que c'est l'homme qui s'engage à perdre. C'est le sens profond de ce guignon, de cette malédiction dont il se réclame toujours et qu'il attribue toujours à une intervention de l'extérieur, alors que c'est son choix le plus profond, non pas la conséquence mais la source de sa poésie. Il est certain de l'échec total de l'entreprise humaine et s'arrange pour échouer dans sa propre vie, afin de témoigner, par sa défaite singulière, de la défaite humaine en général."

3 L. Trotsky, Literature and revolution, Ann Arbor, Ann Arbor paperbacks for the study of Communism and Marxism, 1960.

4 Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, p. 129.

5 Ibid, p. 87, n. 4.

In L'Idiot de la famille, the commitment of the poet is accepted as justifiable and valid. Sartre expresses Flaubert's commitment as a positive attempt to fail, and elaborates this into a theme which runs through the entire work.

In the Critique, Sartre had discussed language as praxis. He had described it as an inert materiality which circulated rather like money, and which forged the link between men. It was the way a man had of conveying his project to another - through words. Flaubert's relationship to language is of considerable importance in determining, in Sartre's terms, his project. Therefore, it is not surprising that much of volume I of L'Idiot de la famille is concerned with Flaubert's acquisition of and relationship to language. Sartre gives us to understand that Flaubert was slow in learning to speak, and that he parroted words, rather than uttering them in full comprehension of their meaning. His relationship to reading was much the same: he did not need to transform the ciphers because somebody could do it for him, and yet he was fully aware that the ciphers would communicate a message to him.

Sartre has refined the notion of man's relationship to language rather more crudely expressed in Qu'est-ce que la littérature? where he maintained that each man found himself in one of two positions vis-à-vis language:

"L'homme qui parle est au-delà des mots, près de l'objet; le poète est en deçà. Le poète est hors du langage, il voit les mots à l'envers, comme s'il n'appartenait pas à la condition humaine et que venant vers les hommes, il reconstrût d'abord la parole comme une barrière. Au lieu de connaître d'abord les choses par leur nom, il semble qu'il ait d'abord un contact silencieux avec elles."⁶

6 Ibid, pp. 64-65.

In L'Idiot de la famille, language is still regarded as both a means of communication and as poetic - that is, each word contains a microcosm⁷. However, the two aspects may now be present in the language of one man:

"Le mot, chez Gustave, apparaît à la lettre comme un hallucinatoire mais non point en agissant sur les couches profondes du vécu: (. . .)sa fonction est double: d'une part il stoppe et réfléchit sur elles-mêmes les passions vraies ou feintes qui s'y engouffrent comme s'il était leur objet en chair et en os, d'autre part, il s'offre comme l'index tendu qui désigne un horizon, comme un signal orientant et définissant une quête."⁸

Language itself may be presented in two forms, spoken and written, with the spoken word being equated with an expression of Faith, the feminine element, and the written word with an expression of Science, the masculine element. Sartre's terminology becomes confusing at this point. It is important to remember the difference between the notion 'parler' in the senses of 'agir' and 'la transmission orale'. Sartre comments⁹ that in literate societies and among literate individuals, every dealing with the printed word is audio-visual, although one aspect will always outweigh the other.

"Quel que soit le message, la transmission orale comporte toujours une part de représentation donc de pathos: parler, c'est souvent un acte mais celui-ci se transforme en geste à la première difficulté. Pour Gustave, c'est le pathos pur: il n'use jamais de sa voix pour raisonner, il s'exhibe en elle comme passivité constituée."¹⁰

7 Ibid, p. 67.

8 L'Idiot, pp. 923-924.

9 Ibid, p. 868.

10 Ibid, p. 870.

Play-acting was, in Flaubert's childhood, one of his methods of self-expression. On the stage, in dramatic presentations, certain conventions are respected, but the actor always needs the complicity of an audience to confer a meaning on the words he uses. The same is true of the reading of a novel. Here, the reader/audience accepts certain conventions, and usually creates from the inert materiality of the printed word a world fairly similar to that created by the writer. However, the reader is free to come to the literary work with a different outlook, and may create from the printed page a world quite different from that imagined by the author. Madame Bovary, read by the bourgeoisie under the Second Empire, is an example of such an occurrence.

Culler, in Flaubert: the uses of uncertainty, discusses the problem of reading. His views are similar to those of Sartre, although more clearly expressed; they may also be readily applied to Sartre's own work. He states that :

"the problem of reading is crucial because our notions of what to do when confronted with a text are the major constituents of the institution of literature. The meaning of a work is clearly not the sum of the meanings of its sentences; to 'understand' a work requires more than knowledge of a language. The institution of literature is a repository of conventions and assumptions, expectations and interpretive operations, which enable readers to take up a text, order it, and produce meaning from that ordering. An author writes within and at times against the set of conventions of reading which he takes to be operative in his culture, and to understand the form within which he is writing one must attempt to make explicit the expectations and procedures of readers which it presupposes. And when the novel has become self-conscious and problematic, then the expectations and interpretive operations of readers become doubly important, for they constitute, in one sense, its subject: to read the novel is to observe the ways in which it frustrates one's attempts to make sense of it."¹¹

11 J. Culler, Flaubert: the uses of uncertainty, London, Elek, 1974, pp. 18-19.

The act of reading by a committed individual is likely to involve certain critical attitudes. In Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, Sartre describes the relationship between writing and reading as dialectical. The two interconnected acts require two separate agents. It is the joint effort of the author and the reader which makes this imaginary yet concrete thing, which constitutes a work of the mind, arise. Reading is thus defined as the synthesis between perception and creation¹². However, in the same way as Sartre modified his view of man's relation to language, so he altered his ideas on the reading process.

The distinction which Sartre makes between these two processes is that one, which may be designated 'reading', involves perception and creation, and the other, 're-reading', involves imagination and creation¹³. 'Reading' is an attempt to transform a thing into an idea¹⁴, whereas 're-reading' is the destruction of the act of reading and its replacement by the dream or the imagined¹⁵. Apparently, Flaubert spent a great deal of time reading works he had already read. (Enid Starkie¹⁶, viewing this action in relation to the world, commented on the obvious superficiality of these readings.) Sartre sees in them another instance of Flaubert's incapacity or refusal to face the real world. By reading a book again, Flaubert was able to make a mockery of time: both author and reader were suspended in eternity, or a kind of timelessness, where masterpieces became part of a cyclical pattern, repeated at will. He was also able, by using his imagination, to give new

12 Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, pp. 91-105.

13 L'Idiot, p. 2080.

14 Ibid, v. 3, p. 51.

15 Ibid, p. 2047.

16 Enid Starkie, Flaubert; the making of the master, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967.

life to pre-existing forms and produce and re-produce in literary form various life-like situations.

For Flaubert, as for Sartre, the subject of literature had to be everything, and each work, whatever its length, had to say all there was to say. Flaubert insisted on the necessity of including details which might seem irrelevant to the larger concept of the work, but which in fact contributed to the construction of the larger framework. Sartre, similarly, in L'Idiot de la famille, observes and records seemingly insignificant details. He adopts a convention of the anti-novel by refusing to highlight certain aspects, thereby granting them a status they may not have had at the time. The reader may have felt swamped by the plethora of detail in the first two volumes. Sartre indicates his possible intention in a section heading towards the end of the second volume. This heading¹⁷, Gustave Flaubert de 45 à 47, is reminiscent of a film title, Cléo de 5 à 7; the film lasted exactly two hours, and showed the audience what a young girl did one evening. Each person watching the film was able to decide which were the significant factors in Cléo's life. The reader of L'Idiot de la famille is encouraged to do likewise and is thus allowed to maintain his own creative freedom.

Sartre appears to accept Flaubert's commitment as an expression of his relationship to the world around him; however he did launch two criticisms. He has stated on a number of occasions that he could feel only antipathy towards the novelistic creations of Flaubert. (It would appear that he did not consider these characters or settings poorly drawn,

17 L'Idiot, p. 2013.

but rather that they were so well drawn as to exact a positive reaction to the type of person portrayed - in the case of Flaubert's literary characters, people whose values are totally opposed to Sartre's.)

Sartre also criticised Flaubert's view of the creative process. He himself believed man found inspiration in the world around him, in the actions and creations of other men, and that the ultimate relationship was with another human being. However, he maintained that for nineteenth century writers, inspiration was a divine gift. He had already made us aware of what, in his view, was Flaubert's ambiguous relationship to the divinity.

Therefore, even if for Flaubert there was no God, the source of literature would still be found in some "unobservable". Thus Sartre was able to claim that, since Flaubert wrote as the omniscient narrator, from the point of view of the Absolute, he had set himself up as the source of divine inspiration, as God in relation to his own literary creations.

In the preface to Nathalie Sarraute's Portrait d'un inconnu, Sartre discussed the relationship of the author to his work. He claimed¹⁸ that by allowing us to sense an intangible authenticity, by showing us the constant coming and going from the particular to the general, by tenaciously depicting the reassuring, dreary world of the inauthentic, Mme Sarraute had achieved a technique which made it possible to attain, over and beyond the psychological, human reality in its very existence. To do this, she distinguished three spheres of generality: a) the sphere of character; b) the sphere of moral commonplace; c) the sphere of art. Sartre works within

18 J-P. Sartre, 'Portrait d'un inconnu', in Situations IV, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, pp. 10-11.

these spheres of generality in L'Idiot de la famille, placing his characters very firmly in relation to these spheres of operation, and at the same time allowing a glimpse of his own situation. The ambiguity of the position of the writer as purveyor of the whole truth is linked with the question Sartre posed at the beginning of L'Idiot de la famille: 'What can we know of a man today?' According to one aspect of Sartre's philosophy of literature, the author's presence should not intrude into the work; according to another, the presence will necessarily be felt, as it will determine the perspective of the novel, since the author is 'situated'. As Curtis remarks¹⁹:

"Sacré romancier! On a beau essayer de l'escamoter, il est toujours là. Mais enfin, l'essentiel est qu'il n'attire pas l'attention du lecteur sur lui par des façons trop indiscreètes."

And indeed Sartre the novelist does remain relatively discreet. It may be alleged that he carries his discretion to the point where he confuses his readers. There are numerous passages in L'Idiot de la famille where it is impossible to discover whether the views expressed are those actually expressed by Flaubert; those Flaubert might have expressed, interpreted by Sartre; or those of Sartre. Sartre the biographer would probably explain this as evidence of the empathy existing between the writer and his subject. Sceptical readers could contend that this is either evidence of Sartre's imagination, or that Sartre chose to represent Flaubert in a particular light so that he could express his own superiority over his subject.

19 Jean-Louis Curtis, 'Sartre et le roman', in Les critiques de notre temps et Sartre, Paris, Garnier, 1973, p. 67.

Through his belief in the writer as purveyor of all truth, and because of his attitude towards Flaubert and the nineteenth century, Sartre was able to reconstruct his notion of the literary process as expressed in Qu'est-ce que la littérature? so that it accounted for masterpieces, for works of art. In opposition to the Poet, who, it will be remembered, stood in opposition to the Prose writer, Sartre introduced the Artist.

"Entre artiste et poète, une immense différence: l'un sent, l'autre parle, l'un est le coeur, l'autre est la tête."²⁰

Literature, or any other product of the Artist will be unworldly. Yet it will follow worldly rules. For Flaubert, as for Sartre, literature has everything as its subject, and should say all there is to say. The unifying factor in disparate situations will be language, or rather the use of language, according to Flaubert, for Flaubert saw Beauty in the form of the expression. He became known as an exponent of Art for Art's sake, subscribing to the view that it is not what he says that conveys the thought of the Artist, but the way in which he says it. Sartre considered, in L'Idiot de la famille, that it was impossible to achieve Beauty through the use of language. In an interview²¹, after the publication of L'Idiot de la famille, he said that in this work he was not concerned with producing a literary style; any style to be found would result from the subject matter under discussion; the subject matter should be able to produce its own unity. Furthermore, his aim was to show a method and a man, rather than to produce a work of literature.

20 L'Idiot, p. 1484.

21 'Sur L'Idiot de la famille', in Situations X, Paris, Gallimard, 1976.

It is generally accepted that Sartre was influenced by Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's belief that there are two sorts of author, those who write for the sake of their subject and those who write for the sake of writing, is mirrored by Sartre's belief in committed writing, rather than Art for Art's sake. Another aspect of Schopenhauer's thought sometimes mirrored by Sartre is to be found in their opinions of lengthy works. Schopenhauer argued that long-windedness was often used to put off the 'nascetur ridiculus mus', whilst Sartre stated that, when Critique de la raison dialectique was published, logically Question de méthode should have come after the main body of the work; however, he placed it first for fear that it should appear that a mountain had brought forth a mouse. When challenged on the length of L'Idiot de la famille²², Sartre replied that the book had been written as the words sprang to mind, because the simplest and most fluent form was best. This is not really a valid answer to the criticism. Large sections of the work appear muddled and loosely argued. Some parts, particularly in volume II, seem to be transcriptions of recorded discussions, or possibly to have been dictated, because of the loose, occasionally incoherent sentence structure, and the errors which may be typographical and the result of poor proof-reading, but which may also be the result of confusing homophones such as et/est and encrage/ancrage²³.

The whole seems contrived to mystify and to warrant the use of Schopenhauer's argument on long-windedness. Sartre supports the hypothesis

22 Sur L'Idiot, p. 93.

23 That these sections may have been dictated or transcribed from recordings only became apparent to me after my reading, and in another context. In a work of the length and complexity of L'Idiot de la famille, one may expect occasional typographical errors; therefore I did not make a note of the odd constructions.

that L'Idiot de la famille was intended to mystify in an interview given to L'Idiot International²⁴. The interviewer asked whether Sartre's cultural views had been changed by the events of May 1968 in France. His reply is worth quoting at length:

"Le problème que je pose dans mon cas, un intellectuel de 65 ans qui, depuis 25-27 ans a dans la tête d'écrire un Flaubert, c'est-à-dire d'utiliser les méthodes connues, scientifiques si vous voulez, en tout cas analytiques, etc., pour étudier un homme. Vient mai 68. Ça fait déjà 15 années que je travaille, que je suis dedans. Qu'est-ce je dois faire? Abandonner? Ça n'a pas de sens, et pourtant, je ne sais plus qui disait cela, "les quarante volumes de Lénine représentent une oppression pour les masses", ce qu'on peut croire sur parole car les masses n'ont ni le temps, ni les moyens actuellement d'aborder ce type de connaissance qui est une connaissance d'intellectuel. Alors, que faire? Ce problème est précis et pratique: que faire quand on est depuis quinze ans sur un livre, que finalement on est resté dans une certaine mesure le même parce qu'on n'abandonne pas toute son enfance, etc. Que faire? J'ai décidé de l'achever, mais du fait que je l'achève, je reste sur le plan de l'ancien intellectuel."

In other words, in spite of his statements over the years, on the subject of literature and the writer influencing society, and addressing themselves to the man in the street, Sartre indicates that he never really moved far from an élitist position, writing ultimately for himself.

Les mots was the title Sartre gave his autobiography. Words have been the concern of Sartre's entire life. Words were also the life-long concern of Flaubert. Sartre criticised Flaubert, because as he stated in L'Idiot de la famille, Flaubert's project was to "vole[r] le langage aux hommes, [le détourner] de ses fins pratiques, asservir sa matière à rendre par elle-même des imaginaires inarticulables"²⁵. The consequence of this action

24 J-P. Sartre, 'L'ami du peuple', interview in L'Idiot International, no. 103, September 1970.

25 L'Idiot, p. 1618.

was that:

"vous aurez incarné dans vos phrases le pôle de toute imagination, le Beau ou le Mal radical, en faisant sentir à propos du langage que le monde est produit et soutenu par une liberté maligne. Le style c'est le silence du discours, le silence dans le discours, le but imaginaire et secret de la parole écrite."²⁶

Yet, as several critics have pointed out²⁷, in L'Idiot de la famille alone, Sartre probably published more words than Flaubert did in his entire life. In an attempt to communicate his own project, Sartre himself could be said to have stolen language, and diverted it from its practical ends. Flaubert's works do not suffer the fate of being left unread on library shelves, as Sartre had predicted for the literary productions of many nineteenth century writers. Aronson states that L'Idiot de la famille

"should not be read, and except for Sartre's friends, a few Sartre or Flaubert scholars, or PhD candidates in search of a new field to explore, it won't be. Why? Because it can't be. L'Idiot de la famille violates elementary rules of human communication which the political Sartre expressed so well in What is Literature? It has no respect for the reader, and makes impossible demands on him; it is undisciplined, self-indulgent, boring and unreal."²⁸

The unreal was the aspect of Flaubert's life which Sartre criticised most strongly. However, an examination of L'Idiot de la famille will show that the entire work is based on the imaginary. If the reader compares Sartre's position on commitment and the writer as outlined in Qu'est-ce que la littérature? and in the Critique, with that put forward in L'Idiot de la famille, he becomes aware that there is no real change to the broader concepts of the theory, although there are slight modifications to the details. What has changed is the framework. Sartre has moved from the

26 Ibid.

27 These include Levin and Aronson.

28 Ronald Aronson, 'L'Idiot de la famille: the ultimate Sartre?' in Telos, no. 20, Summer 1974, p. 100.

real world of the Europe of the twentieth century to his own view of the nineteenth. In other words, he has moved into the realm of the imaginary, as he himself acknowledged, when he described the work as 'une fable'. He has done this with all the scholarly impulse he formerly vested in his political writings. Aronson views the author of L'Idiot de la famille as 'the ultimate Sartre'. "It should be obvious that his entire career has led to this imaginary study of the interior of an imaginary person." ²⁹

Language, in Sartre's philosophy, has always been fundamental to relations between men, forming a most elementary bond, and allowing a statement of each man's praxis to be made. Whilst on the one hand accepting Flaubert's praxis, Sartre condemns it because it "stole language from men", prevented them from communicating. Sartre himself is also guilty of the theft of language; as well as of false representation. His supposed attempt to represent the real world of the nineteenth century is nothing more than the production of a figment of his imagination, and even the attempt to communicate this image may be seen as a failure.

29 Ibid, p. 107.

A CRIME COMMITTED AGAINST WHOM?

L'IDIOT DE LA FAMILLE AS A NOVEL

Sartre insisted that a good novel should be like a detective story. One's initial reaction to this is that by reading the book, one will learn who committed some immoral or illegal act and how. Sartre's statement that in L'Idiot de la famille he wanted to 'show a man' would seem to bear this out, if this man is to be he who stole language. Yet the reader would be mistaken if he saw this as the only aspect of a detective story. Sartre also intended to 'show a method'. In this case, he has given us insights into how a detective goes about gathering clues, and how he makes inferences from these clues.

He had spoken of L'Idiot de la famille as a work of fiction¹ and expressed the hope that it would be considered 'un roman vrai'. Claude Mouchard² points out that the phrase a 'true novel' implies two quite distinct demands - representing the specific time of the hero's life and the time for questions and methodical reflection, lived time and logical time. Culler describes the novel as 'an ironic form, born of the discrepancy between meaning and experience, whose source of value lies in the interest of exploring that gap and filling it, while knowing that any claim to have filled it derives from blindness³. Serge Doubrovsky agrees that a novel cannot be true. He picks up an image used by Sartre in Qu'est-ce que la littérature? Here, Sartre described literature as a dialectical process which, like a spinning-top, exists only in movement⁴. Doubrovsky comments

1 'Sur L'Idiot', p. 94.

2 Claude Mouchard, 'Un roman vrai', in Critique, v. 27, December 1971, p. 1029.

3 Culler, p. 24.

4 Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, p. 91.

that L'Idiot de la famille is as fragile as a top whilst it is spinning. No sooner has the reader managed to fix on one of the many aspects of the work than Sartre upsets the balance, and the illusion is shattered. In asking us to accept his work as a 'true novel', Sartre is trying to embroil us further. There is indeed truth, 'fact', in L'Idiot de la famille, but a true novel cannot be discovered. The truth of a fiction never comes from some external point of reference, but from an internal cohesion; it is therefore fictitious. A real novel is full of falsehoods. A true novel is not a novel at all. Doubrovsky concludes that Sartre's only choice is to write a 'quasi-roman quasi vrai'⁵.

The critics agree that whatever else the study might be, even in Sartre's terms it cannot be dubbed a novel. This is partly because as Levin points out⁶ Sartre is never the disinterested observer. He is justified in the criticism that Sartre is less concerned to canvass the facts or to understand the situation than to pass dogmatic and facile judgements on human behaviour at large. Throughout L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre constructs a picture of Flaubert as a hypersensitive individual, the son crushed by the dominating father. Levin suggests that this picture is less a result of careful observation, of the sort that Flaubert himself would have engaged in, than of the influence of Kafka, especially through the Metamorphosis, which has etched the pattern of the dominating father/crushed son relationship in twentieth century consciousness. For Flaubert is in fact known to have been an affectionate son and a devoted uncle; he is also

5 Serge Doubrovsky, 'Une étrange toupie', in Les critiques de notre temps et Sartre.

6 Harry Levin, 'A literary enormity: Sartre on Flaubert', in Journal of the History of Ideas, v. 33, no. 4, 1972, p. 644.

recognised to have been a congenial companion, especially on his visits to Paris. It would be wrong to imply that Sartre has fabricated an entire life for Flaubert, based on nothing but his own moral position. He refers constantly to Flaubert's early writings, regarding these productions of adolescence as mirrors of the soul. He also quotes repeatedly from Flaubert's correspondence of both youth and maturity. On this evidence, he concludes that Flaubert was a man who sought all his life to deny the bourgeois he had been born. Starkie, referring also to the correspondence, shows Flaubert as a bourgeois, accepting his condition, although railing against the bourgeoisie as a class.

Sartre may be seen to have adopted a method of Flaubert's: 'imagining the real', although in using it, he did the opposite of what Flaubert would have done. Flaubert used imagination to present a more easily understood truth, whereas Sartre in L'Idiot de la famille, used imagination to overcome the real.

Sartre has made many comments on the novelistic form over the years. He has written novels, as well as philosophical treatises and political articles, and is obviously aware of differences in approach and style. Without doubt, he would like to think that his philosophical and political texts have greatest clarity and import for his readers, and yet had to admit that 'curiously enough' his literary manner of writing was the clearest⁷. It may have been this realisation which led him to modify his position on the prose writer and the poet, for in the same interview, he said that the prose writer can never after all be purely and simply a man who points things out, who designates things. Also in this article, Sartre attempted to set the

7 'L'écrivain et sa langue', p. 44.

novel aside from other types of prose writing as 'some kind of essay but one which is going to contain emotional as well as reasoned argument'⁸. As Jean-Louis Curtis points out⁹, Sartre has always tried to emphasise the fact that the only type of novel perfectly adapted to the demands of our time is the 'situation novel'. Whereas, in Sartre's eyes, writers of past ages felt it possible to remove themselves spiritually from their own time, today's writers are very aware of the world in which they live, and therefore they can only write 'situation novels' with neither internal narrator nor omniscient witness. Furthermore, Sartre had always felt a certain distaste for the formal untruths and distortions which art entailed. He took as a model of the ideal novel the work of Saint-Exupéry, whose novels of aviation centred on the

"technical relationship of men to things, in which objects are neither described in an objective, contemplative way, nor unrealised, but transcended toward their use, revealed by their position in the human project itself. And the aesthetic formula behind such a work is neither that of static description nor of poetic unrealisation but rather that expressed as an artistic law by Valéry, namely that the density of a literary object is in direct proportion to the multiplicity of relationships it entertains with other elements of the work."¹⁰

The influence of Marxist literary critical theory is obvious in Sartre's statement of the expression of the relationship of men to things. Sartre was, however, striving after a utopian ideal. In L'Idiot de la famille, he attempts to work out Gustave Flaubert's relationship to his father, and to society under the Second Empire. Society, however, does not operate

8 Ibid, p. 56.

9 Curtis, in Les critiques, p. 64.

10 Frederic Jameson, 'Three methods in Sartre's literary criticism', in J. K. Simon, ed., Modern French Criticism, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1972, p. 213.

mechanically, and any attempts to make it do so must either be doomed to failure, or be seen as expressions of a fantasy existence. The model of the novel of aviation seems very definitely strained when applied to the life of a person.

Sartre was also firmly in favour of the so-called 'anti-novel'¹¹. It is interesting to compare his opinions on the work of Mme Sarraute with his own ultimate novelistic creation. The anti-novel, according to Sartre, maintains the appearances and outlines of the ordinary novel, and can be classified as work of the imagination with fictitious characters, whose story they tell. However, it differs from the ordinary novel in that its aim is to make the reader more aware of the novel in order to challenge it, to destroy it before our very eyes, whilst in fact seeming to construct it. The anti-novel should read like a detective story. Attention has already been drawn to Sartre's interest in detective stories, and his concurrence with Simone de Beauvoir in her definition of a real novel.

He opposed the type of story recounted by the old-fashioned storyteller, which emphasised present and past acts, partly because this form of narrative not only suggested that all facts were known to the storyteller, but that there was some order of priority inherent in the events and a causal relationship between the facts recounted. However, within his own 'novel', he not only fabricated a 'récit', he also sought to impose a perspective through a theoretical framework. Mouchard believes that a

11 He expressed these views in the preface to Nathalie Sarraute's Portrait d'un inconnu, which appeared in Situations IV.

novel is successful when the various aspects form a whole; if in L'Idiot de la famille the story and the theory hold together, it is probably only because Flaubert's texts are included and act as a "solid, unifying cement"¹².

Sartre praised Nathalie Sarraute for her integrity in seeking to safeguard her sincerity as a storyteller. He commented that she took her characters neither from within nor from without, because she realised that we are 'both for ourselves and for others, entirely within and without at the same time.' Sartre himself, in L'Idiot de la famille, in that he was dealing with people who had existed in the real world rather than characters who were entirely creations of his imagination, attempted to take his characters from both within and without at the same time. He tried to present the psychological motivations as well as the objective situation. The time taken to establish the inner workings of a person's mind, as well as to describe his relationship with the external world, mean that it is very difficult for the reader to imagine the character actually 'situated' and thus the attempts to present a character both from within and from without are rarely successful. One notable exception is Sartre's depiction of Achille-Cléophas at the time when Gustave's nervous troubles appear to have started. He presents a concerned father genuinely worried about his son's health and about his future in a competitive world. This may in fact be the only glimpse of human relations in the entire work. There may be others. The entire work does resemble the imagined detective's notebook, and the reader is invited to survey the clues gathered together. The task is exacting, given the amount of material to be sifted, and any interpretation

12 Mouchard, in Les critiques, p. 1042.

is always personal. Sartre tries to maintain his integrity as a storyteller, as there is no obvious omniscient narrator, and thus there seems to be no 'right answer'.

Sartre's approach in L'Idiot de la famille may in fact appear dramatic rather than novelistic. Frederic Jameson devoted part of Sartre: the origins of a style to showing that Sartre's style is inherently melodramatic. Without taking into account the titles Sartre bestows on his characters, such as 'the knights of nothingness', and the roles in which they are cast, the overall impression is very much of a melodrama. Reading repetitive sections of the work, I was reminded of the plot of a Victorian melodrama: The murder of Maria Marten. The villain deals with the heroine by a) strangling her; b) stabbing her several times; c) emptying a loaded pistol into her; d) beating her to a pulp with a shovel. It was the shovel which proved his undoing. Sartre warns his readers early that he intends to use the shovel (and other weapons too) when he writes that in order to prove a certain point, he will be using twenty more examples later. That a 'crime' has been or is about to be committed is clear. The question is 'against whom?' Against Flaubert, as already suggested; more seriously, perhaps, against the reader, who is necessary to Sartre as a participant in the dialectical process.

L'Idiot de la famille contains large sections based on the early writings of Flaubert. These are used both as a basis for the forming of Flaubert as a literary character, and also as the subject of Sartre's literary criticism. Most of the literary criticism is at the level of

psychocriticism, and here Sartre follows the patterns set by Marie Bonaparte, the Freudian psychoanalyst in her analysis of the life and work of Edgar Allan Poe. Sartre believed that Flaubert's early writings and his correspondence enabled him to gain a clear insight into the workings of the mind of the adult Flaubert, for here were expressed the problems on which were founded Flaubert's 'neurosis'. The treatment of the juvenilia is skilful, at times brilliant, and almost always convincing, within its accepted framework. For Sartre avoids the pitfall, found for example in the work of Maury, of attempting to link each symbol directly with every other symbol. Instead, he tends to draw structural-type analogies. However, in spite of his obvious facility in ferreting out attitudes and modes of expression in Flaubert's writings and relating them to events in real life, there are aspects which give the reader cause for thought. Some aspects seem exaggerated, and so make the reader question other assumptions. In order to 'prove' his statement that Flaubert was slow in learning to speak for himself, and that part of his problems in confronting reality later in life stemmed from the fact that as a child Flaubert saw that adults (or others) were, in a way, in charge of language, Sartre gives as evidence that adults continually put words into his mouth, by telling him to 'say good morning to the lady' or by asking 'where does it hurt? Here? Here?'¹³ To suggest that this sort of event gives rise to neurosis is absurd. Most people, at least in the western world, would have experienced this type of prompting during childhood, yet it would be madness to assume that this has given rise to a whole generation living at a remove from reality.

13 L'Idiot, p. 23.

There are other instances where Sartre has attempted to use passages from Flaubert's published works to make a point. From a passage in Madame Bovary, where Léon expresses an interest in Emma's glove, Sartre insinuates that for Flaubert the gloved hand was a fetish, a phallic symbol. This should probably be treated as whimsy. It is possible that Sartre would have taken up this sort of episode in the unwritten volume four of L'Idiot de la famille, which was intended to be a 're-reading' or a critical analysis on structural lines of Madame Bovary. However, within the scope of this study it would be nonsensical to speculate on what Sartre had intended to include and what approach he would have taken.

Literary settings and characterisations can be determined by the vocabulary the writer uses. Joseph Halpern¹⁴ noted Sartre's choice of sensual vocabulary in L'Idiot de la famille. He remarked on this as a feature of Sartre's writing, showing that from L'Imaginaire, where Sartre wrote of the 'artist-prophet, philosopher-hero as masculine figure, form-giver, hard and erect; thing among things, man among men', he tended to emphasise the superiority of the male over the female, the masculine element over the feminine element. The opposition of masculine and feminine elements has already been explained as the opposition of active and passive elements, or of head and heart. Baudelaire¹⁵ offers a crude example of Sartre's use of sensual vocabulary to assert a masculine superiority over the feminine. In this work, masculine and feminine types of imagination are discussed. The masculine is classified as 'explosive' and the feminine as 'retractile'.

14 Joseph Halpern, Critical fictions; the literary criticism of J-P. Sartre, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1976.

15 J-P. Sartre, Baudelaire, Paris, Gallimard, 1947.

Sartre also used these symbols in Orphée Noir¹⁶ where the constructive, revolutionary potency of black poetry is transposed into his metaphorical scheme of sexuality. In comparison with effeminate European litterateurs, the black is the male of the earth, the sperm of nature. George Bauer¹⁷ suggests an origin for these types of imagination, and places the whole in the perspective of Sartre's search for the self:

"The Orphic descent into the self results in the creation of the poem-object that fulfils Sartre's aesthetic requirement of the representation of man's becoming . . . Sartre gingerly relates these adjectives of flickering and turbulence to that of Nietzsche's 'Dionysian'. The Nietzschean antithesis between the 'Dionysian' and the 'Apollonian' is well-suited to Sartre's 'esthétique d'opposition' and his categories of being and existence. Nietzsche himself defines the 'Apollonian' as: 'that state of rapt repose in the presence of a visionary world, in the presence of the world of 'beautiful appearance', designed as a deliverance from 'becoming'; the word 'Dionysos' on the other hand, stands for strenuous becoming, grown self-conscious of the violent anger of the destroyer.'"

The reader is aware, in L'Idiot de la famille, of the Dionysian character of Sartre's writing, and of Sartre as both the creator and destroyer of his literary figures, particularly Flaubert.

The fact that Flaubert has been depicted as representing the feminine element, through various studies both of his life and his writings carried out in L'Idiot de la famille, seems characteristic of Sartre's approach to his biographical heroes. In the preface to L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre states that he had conceived the project with the idea of having a score to

16 J.-P. Sartre, 'Orphée noir', in Situations III, Paris, Gallimard, 1949.

17 George Bauer, Sartre and the artist, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1969, p. 167.

settle with Flaubert. However, over the years, his attitude had mellowed, to the point where his antipathy had become empathy, and he could finally approach Flaubert without any prejudices. This may be refuted by a detailed study of Sartre's vocabulary. Within the scope of this study, there is no room for such a detailed investigation, and I am aware of the dangers inherent in presenting two or three superficial examples. However, the following may serve as indications of Sartre's intentions. His discussion of Flaubert's "negative verticality", and its sexual implications has already been mentioned: Flaubert refused to accept his responsibility as male. To emphasise this, although the attitude is never made explicit, Sartre takes what at first appears to be a mechanical approach to Flaubert in his situation, which would accord with his views on the novel of aviation. On reflection, this can also be taken as an extension of the view of Flaubert as 'female'. The examples taken refer to the sphere of language and communication. Sartre describes language in relation to Flaubert as a 'mauvais conducteur', using what psychocritics may see as the male symbol of the lightning conductor. On two occasions, at least, Sartre comments on Flaubert's place within society; in both cases he uses the metaphor of the screw: he describes the child Flaubert firstly as being 'mal vissé dans l'univers du discours'¹⁸ and later writes that 'la cellule sociale est trop intégrée; un tour de vis de trop, somme toute'¹⁹.

Underlying the exploration of Flaubert's character, the reader senses Sartre's 'masculinity' opposing Flaubert's 'femininity'. As Sartre himself wrote in Question de méthode:

18 L'Idiot, p. 23.

19 Ibid, p. 53.

"Nous ne devons jamais oublier que le style d'un auteur est directement lié à une conception du monde: la structure des phrases, des paragraphes, l'usage et la place du substantif, du verbe, etc., la constitution des paragraphes et les caractéristiques du récit - pour ne citer que ces quelques particularités - traduisent des présuppositions secrètes qu'on peut déterminer différentiellement sans recourir encore à la biographie."²⁰

Sartre's own style is so reflective of his conception of the world, that L'Idiot de la famille can be neither novelistic nor factual. Halpern claims that he has satisfactorily created the necessary tension between the 'roman vrai' and the 'vie romancée' to make both aspects of the work successful. However, this is not the case. To place the relationship between imagination and documentation in perspective, it will be necessary to 'resort to biography', and to examine the question 'What can one know of a man today?'

20 Question de méthode, p. 90.

A MAN IMAGINED? L'IDIOT DE LA FAMILLE AS

A BIOGRAPHY OF FLAUBERT

1. Interview given to by Pierre Bonna.

2. Wilfred Deane, "Lectures on the 19th century French world: essays in honor of Jean Starobinski," 1970, p. 229.

3. Janson, Three methods, p. 218.

L'Idiot de la famille, in its sub-title "Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857", proclaims the work a biography, and the first page of the Preface states that Sartre's concern was to discover what one could know of a man today. In an interview with Le Monde¹ Sartre said that the underlying plan in his 'Flaubert' was to show that, eventually, everything could be communicated, and that without being God, being a man like any other, one could arrive at a perfect understanding of another man, as long as one had all the information necessary.

The biography of Flaubert was not the first work of this nature which Sartre had undertaken. Earlier books and essays dealt with the lives of Baudelaire, Tintoretto, Mallarmé, Genêt and Sartre himself. Wilfred Desan commented that in these works, Sartre showed the artist struggling alone with his overwhelming world and taking flight in imagination, and in L'Idiot de la famille, he had himself taken a theoretical retreat into imagination². Jameson also noted that a significant part of Sartre's life's work had been given over to a portrait and analysis of the French middle class. He contended that 'this is perhaps his most important contribution to the history of ideas behind literature, as opposed to the purely literary examination of forms'³.

A study of other biographers and writers on biography will help to put Sartre's attitude to biography in a broader perspective. Although Sartre

1 Interview given to Le Monde Weekly, June 17-23, 1971.

2 Wilfred Desan, 'Sartre the individualist', in Patterns of the life-world: essays in honor of John Wild, Evanston, Northwestern U.P., 1970, p. 229.

3 Jameson, Three methods, p. 218.

does not acknowledge the influence of André Maurois, it is inconceivable that he should not have read some of Maurois's 'vies romancées' or at least been aware of the scope and form of the biographies. André Maurois asked if we could know the truth of a man⁴. In reply to his own question, he wrote that we could 'try to fix those changing lights and shades', to 'produce the sound of the individual and authentic note', but that the biographer's truth was not empirical. Alan Shelston⁵ saw the attraction of biography as two-fold, appealing to our curiosity about human personality and to our interest in factual knowledge. Maurois believed that 'the search for historical truth is the work of the scholar', whilst 'the search for the expression of a personality is rather the work of the artist'⁶. Virginia Woolf quoted Sir Sidney Lee to sum up the same point:

'The aim of biography', said Sir Sidney Lee, who had perhaps read and written more lives than any man of his time, 'is the truthful transmission of a personality', and no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today. On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality.'⁷

Sartre, in his biographical method, considered the essence of the individual as a dialectic between the truth of history or reality and the truth of personality or imagination. Thus he attempted to balance a Marxist appraisal of the society in which Flaubert lived, with a psycho-analytic investigation of Flaubert and his relationship with this society.

4 André Maurois, Aspects of biography, New York, Ungar, 1966, p. 103.

5 Alan Shelston, Biography, London, Methuen, 1977, p. 3.

6 Maurois, p. 36.

7 Ibid, p. 36.

Sartre would have agreed with Shelston, that although not all twentieth century biography is explicitly Freudian, it lives in Freud's shadow. He was familiar with the earliest work of literary psychoanalysis in French, the work of Marie Bonaparte on Edgar Allan Poe in the 1930's, and was himself an indirect influence on Charles Mauron, in that writer's formulation of psychocriticism. Like other post-Romantic biographers, Sartre dwelt on the formative years of childhood, and influenced by Bruno Bettelheim's writings, went further than many biographers in laying stress on the importance of the earliest months of life in determining future personality. Simone de Beauvoir drew attention to Sartre's reading of Bettelheim's The Empty Fortress⁸, and the influence of this work is clear from the start of L'Idiot de la famille. Sartre explains the emphasis he places on early childhood, when he writes:

'Sans la petite enfance, c'est peu de dire que le biographe bâtit sur le sable: il construit sur la brume avec du brouillard'⁹.

Sartre dwells on the attitudes of Flaubert's parents, particularly his mother, towards him in the first months of his life. He discusses her disappointment at his being a male child, instead of a wished-for daughter, and in part bases what he sees as Flaubert's femininity in this. Sartre also covers the possible results of her doubts over her child's survival, and the mechanical rather than motherly care which he contends Flaubert received from his mother. All of these, together with other events, contributed, he alleges, to creating Flaubert a passive person.

8 Quoted from memory.

9 L'Idiot, p. 55.

Whilst Maurois did not comment in Aspects of biography on the use of Freudian techniques in determining a subject's personality, he does mention the use of history, a facet of biography of some concern to Sartre. For Maurois, history should be to the biographer what it is to the portrait painter, the background against which he sets his model. This is very much the way in which Sartre dealt with the historical background in some parts of his study of Flaubert, for example, in his coverage of Flaubert's school days¹⁰, where Gustave remains in sharp focus. However, especially in volume III, Sartre uses a different perspective. Using broad strokes, he paints a picture of the time in which Flaubert lived, bringing out political and cultural trends. Here his approach is in direct conflict with Edmund Gosse, who held that:

'Broad views are entirely out of place in biography; and there is no greater literary mistake than to attempt what is called The Life and Times of a man. History deals with the fragments of the vast roll of events. It must always begin abruptly and close in the middle of affairs; it must altogether deal, impartially, with a vast number of persons. Biography (. . .) fills the canvas with one figure, and the other characters, however great in themselves, must always be subsidiary to the central hero'¹¹.

Maurois claimed that 'according to the historical determination of a Karl Marx, for instance, the mere intention to write a biography is a crime against truth'¹². However, Sartre's broader interpretation of the Marxian view of the historical process allowed him to use Marx's own writings - he used The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte as an example - to support his own view that the synthesis of an individual's intention and the result of his action was an important factor in the making of history.

10 Ibid, p. 1330.

11 Maurois, p. 61.

12 Ibid, p. 105.

Sartre was keen to present the truth of a man, and was aware that since each individual has many facets, in order to do so, he needed to employ a number of methods to capture the essence. He discussed the need to use novelistic techniques in an attempt to produce 'un roman vrai'. As mentioned in a previous chapter, he likens the novel to a detective's notebook. J. L. Clifford, in From puzzles to portraits, also likens the biographer to a detective, and says that 'as every detective knows, clues keep turning up which are quite unconnected with the main problem, but which eventually lead to others equally important'¹³. Virginia Woolf in The new biography, emphasises the biographer's need to use the techniques of the novelist:

"in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated, others shaded, yet in the process they must never lose their integrity. The biographer chooses; he synthesises; in short he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become the artist"¹⁴.

Sartre stated a number of times that it was Flaubert's literary output which interested him, and which originally led him to believe he had a score to settle with the earlier author. Although he remained antagonistic to certain of Flaubert's attitudes, which he characterised as bourgeois, it is clear that he ended by appreciating the influence of certain factors in Flaubert's development, as he indicated in the Preface to L'Idiot de la famille.

Before considering some of the methods used in L'Idiot de la famille, it is useful to compare Sartre's biography with a more conventional one,

13 J. L. Clifford, From puzzles to portraits, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1970, p. 41.

14 Quoted by Shelston, Biography, pp. 65-66.

such as Enid Starkie's Flaubert; the making of the master and Flaubert the master. The aim of Starkie's biography, published in two volumes, was much the same as that of Sartre. She aimed first to tell the life of Flaubert up to the publication of Madame Bovary, including analyses of the early works; and, second, to look at the work of the mature Flaubert and to attempt some sort of critical analysis of Flaubert's literary output. Yet in spite of their common aim, the subject of the studies, Gustave Flaubert, appears as two quite different people. The reason for this discrepancy is to be found in the methodological approaches used by Starkie and Sartre. Starkie's implied methodological premise was to stick as closely to the facts as possible, to suggest hypotheses rarely, and then only when she had made clear that the statement was hypothetical. She aimed to describe Flaubert rather than to explain him. Sartre, on the other hand, did not regard the facts as ends in themselves, but rather as starting points and landmarks for his project of 'understanding'. Because one level of explanation or understanding entails others, Sartre's method led him further and further from the facts as he built the character of his Flaubert¹⁵.

That Sartre uses three levels of 'fact' in his investigation has already been mentioned. He also uses several different methods to develop and explain the 'character of his Flaubert', which he builds around three main facets - the tragic figure of the accursed poet telling his griefs; the bored old man who has died to life and now rails against the world, and the passive artist who records a world which he eschews and does not comprehend¹⁶.

15 Ronald Aronson, L'Idiot, p. 93.

16 Culler, p. 34.

The first of these methods derives from the notion put forward in L'Être et le néant. Here, Sartre had discussed the extent of control an individual had over his own destiny, and concluded that any man was totally responsible for his place in the world. However, partly through his contact with Marxism, Sartre came to believe that a man's place may, in part, be determined by factors over which he has no control. Thus, in the case of Flaubert, at the moment of his conception, certain factors were unalterable - the baby would be born the younger child of a bourgeois family, his father a doctor, his mother a member of a land-owning family; his parents would have attitudes towards their child and towards the world which would be inescapable, at least in the early years. In L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre maintains that Flaubert remained, throughout his life, the younger son of a bourgeois family, always accepting to be conditioned by his surroundings, his 'prehistory', never taking a stand against the society in which he lived and thus never taking responsibility for his destiny. This was one of the factors which made Flaubert, in the eyes of Sartre, a passive person, a failure.

To reach the same conclusion, and using much of the same material, Sartre employs a type of psychoanalysis. The infant Flaubert's relationship with his mother has already been described and is epitomised in the symbolic emasculation of Flaubert:

"Il est permis ici d'utiliser le vocabulaire de la psychanalyse et d'appeler castration la constitution par les soins maternels d'une activité passive qui empêchera pour toujours le cadet Flaubert de montrer - en quelque domaine que ce soit - une agressivité 'virile'"¹⁷.

17 L'Idiot, p. 875.

The presentation of the relationship of Achille-Cléophas, the father, to his sons Achille and Gustave, similarly, indicates that parental attitudes helped to make Gustave a tentative person.. In this case, Sartre suggests¹⁸ that since the father accepted his elder son, his namesake, as his equal, 'le Même', he had to consider his younger son, Gustave, as different, an outsider, 'l'Autre universel et singulier'.

Sartre analyses Flaubert's writings, particularly the juvenilia, in the same way that he examines the family relationships. He and Starkie are agreed that Madame Bovary represented the limit of Flaubert's literary development, and that later works showed only themes already explored. Much of the analysis of the early works is brilliant literary criticism (see above), and Sartre does not fall into the trap of applying a crude psycho-criticism, of the sort which Mauron applies to the works of Racine. However, he does use the content and form of the works as a basis for psychoanalytic study, for example, Quidquid volueris, where Sartre links the motivations of the half-human half-ape Djalioh, with the forces motivating the young Flaubert - seeing him as an instrument in the game of others, a creature not able to express his real feelings because he does not have the power of speech. Sartre also draws statements from Flaubert's fictional writings, where they are applied to a character, and transfer them directly to Flaubert. A blatant example of this is¹⁹ in relation to Flaubert's short story Bibliomanie, written in November 1836, when Flaubert was fourteen years old. Sartre quotes the sentence: 'He hardly knew how to read', and exclaims 'So, here is the first precise allusion to the difficulties which Flaubert had, when he was about seven, in learning to read and write'. Unfortunately, this type of statement tends

18 Ibid, p. 499.

19 Ibid, p. 285.

to detract from the finesse of some of the literary criticism, and at the same time, adds nothing to the biographical study.

Sartre uses the principles of literary criticism which he set out in Qu'est-ce que la littérature?, although he has modified his position slightly. It will be remembered that, in the earlier work, he accepted only the commitment of the prose writer, and denied the validity of any use of language in a poetic manner. In L'Idiot de la famille, he accepts that the poet, too, may be committed to his project, and draws a line between the poet and the artist. The artist is the poet who expresses what is not actual, who 'irrealises', he is accursed and will spend his days telling of his problems and hardships without achieving any change in his situation. Thus, using yet another method, Sartre reduces Flaubert to the ranks of the passive or impotent. Here, he has on the one hand accepted Flaubert's project to be a writer, and on the other hand, he has nullified the validity of this project, by placing him among the 'accursed poets' who never achieve anything.

These methods, Sartre claims, have attempted to

"comprendre [Flaubert], c'est-à-dire étudier ses conduites à partir de ses fins et les envisager comme réponses à des situations vécues plutôt que de les déclarer aberrantes en les comparant aux stimuli 'réels' ou aux conduites des autres"²⁰.

Superficially, Sartre would seem to have achieved this end, for he has kept Flaubert as the focus of his study almost throughout the first two volumes of L'Idiot de la famille. He has not actually compared Flaubert with his

20 Ibid, v. 3, p. 12.

contemporaries, or considered him acting in the real world. Yet his attempts to understand Flaubert must be far from objective; for Sartre has made an initial judgement of Flaubert, by comparing him with his own view of a man, and found him wanting.

In volume III of L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre attempts to 'situate' Flaubert. Here he sets out to examine the neurosis of the age and to place Flaubert's neurosis in a wider context. To do this, he discusses the place of literature within a society, and restates ideas on reading first set down in Qu'est-ce que la littérature? He discusses, at length, Flaubert's relationship to the Second Empire, bringing together many ideas expressed earlier in L'Idiot de la famille, such as Flaubert's view of nobility, and his comprehension of the Emperor as le Garçon. He attempts to show that Flaubert was not the only young man of his generation to suffer a bourgeois upbringing by comparing him with Leconte de Lisle. As has been shown, the choice of this particular writer for comparison allowed Sartre to reiterate his own views on 'negritude', and to discuss the difference between one type of oppressed group, the working class, and another, the colonised. He had intended volume III to be a Marxist investigation of the nineteenth century. However, he does not examine the development of France, politically or economically; the overall effect is that of conjecture as shakily based as most of the rest of the study, disappointing to any reader who expected to find a rigorous investigation. Furthermore, he does little to 'situate' Flaubert, for the study in volume III relates as little to empirical data as do the biographical details of the first two volumes.

The brief illustration of Sartre's biographical methods has tended to show that the reader will glean little understanding of the actions of

Gustave Flaubert, and that without prior knowledge of his life-story, Sartre's work is in large part unintelligible. However, at the point of deepest frustration, the reader must bear in mind Sartre's own statement, frequently repeated throughout L'Idiot de la famille, that the life of Flaubert, the personality being constructed for the reader, relied to a great extent on the imagination of Flaubert's biographer. Many biographers, including Maurois, have dealt with the need for the biographer to use his imagination and art to change a series of events from actual life into something which has an inner life, and thus rings true²¹.

Bowen²² has pointed out that the biographer cannot get inside the mind of his subject. Sartre, when he says that he has reached a state of empathy with Flaubert, means just the opposite, and throughout L'Idiot de la famille, places himself firmly within his view of Flaubert's mind. This leads to the most serious criticism which can be levelled against L'Idiot de la famille as a biography of Flaubert - that the distinction between biographer and biographee is obscured. Through the shifting use of narrative and monologue and because of the extent of many of the sections, Sartre is able to put forward Flaubert's own views, Flaubert's views as imagined by Sartre, and Sartre's own views as though each were interchangeable with the other and the overall impression no different.

It is worthwhile taking up Maurois's point that the biographer needs to make the life of his subject 'ring true', and to 'novelise' it to a certain extent. Sartre had, after all, dubbed L'Idiot de la famille a

21 Maurois, pp. 180-200.

22 Catherine Bowen, Biography, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1968, p. 96.

"true novel", as well as acknowledging it as an 'imaginary study'.

Aronson remarked²³ that this work of Sartre's, the 'imaginary study', the 'true novel', contained the worst of both possible worlds:

"On the one hand, all the staggering interiority of an extended subjective case study; on the other hand, all the unreality of an extended construct. A novel may be unreal, but at least it is concrete: it deals with living, breathing people and their action."

In Marxism and form, Jameson examined²⁴ the 'biographical impulse' in Sartre's novels and plays. He saw this as the desire to represent the recreation of an individual's most morbid states from the inside - in other words, to present a psychoanalytic structure. He also saw it as central to the problems around which Question de méthode was organised. The importance of this work to the methodology employed in L'Idiot de la famille has been discussed earlier; however, it is relevant to emphasise its place in forming a basis for existential psychoanalysis, and thus for existential biography. Jameson quotes²⁵ a passage from Question de méthode which he believes may stand as the essential theory of Sartre's biographical practice:

"Of course someone will tell us that the proclaimed goal of the followers of Brissot is a mask, that these bourgeois revolutionaries considered themselves and presented themselves as illustrious Romans, that it is the objective result that really defines what they did. But we must be careful: the original thought of Marx, as we find it in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte attempts a difficult synthesis of intention and of result; the contemporary use of that thought is superficial and dishonest. If we push the Marxist metaphor to its limit, in fact, we arrive at a new idea of human action. Imagine

23 Aronson, L'Idiot, p. 106.

24 Frederic Jameson, Marxism and form, Princeton, N.J., Princeton U.P., 1971, pp. 211-214.

25 Ibid, pp. 227-228.

an actor who is playing Hamlet and who is caught up in his role. He crosses his mother's room to kill Polonius hidden behind the arras. But that is not what he is actually doing. He is crossing a stage before an audience and passing from 'court side' to 'garden side' in order to earn his living, to win fame, and this real activity defines his position in society. But one cannot deny that these real results are present in some way in his imaginary act. One cannot deny that the movement of the imaginary prince expresses in a certain indirect and refracted manner the actor's real movement, nor that the very way in which he takes himself for Hamlet is his own way of knowing himself as an actor. To return to our Romans of 1789, their way of calling themselves Cato is their way of making themselves bourgeois, members of a class which discovers History and which already wants to stop it, which claims to be universal and which establishes the proud individualism of its members upon a competitive economy - in short, the heirs of a classical culture. Everything is there. It is one and the same thing to declare oneself Roman and to want to stop the Revolution. Or rather, the better one can pose as Brutus or Cato, the better one will be able to stop the Revolution. This thought, obscure even to itself, sets up mystical ends which enclose the confused awareness of its objective ends. Thus we may speak simultaneously of a subjective drama (the simple play of appearances which hides nothing, which contains no 'unconscious' element) and of an objective, intentional organisation of real means with a view to achieving real ends - without any organisation of all this by a consciousness or a premeditated will. Very simply, the truth of the imaginary praxis is in the real praxis, and the real to the extent that it takes itself as merely imaginary, includes implicit references to the imaginary praxis as to its interpretation. The bourgeois of 1789 does not pretend to be Cato in order to stop the Revolution by denying History and by substituting virtue for politics; neither does he tell himself that he resembles Brutus in order to give himself a mythical comprehension of an action which he carries out but which escapes him. He does both at the same time. And it is precisely this synthesis which allows us to discover an imaginary action in each one as a doublet and at the same time the matrix of real objective action."

(Question de méthode, pp. 38-39)

Through this passage, Sartre draws a parallel between the consequence of real and imaginary actions, and in the final sentence of the passage quoted gives precedence to the imaginary. In the same way, in his study of Flaubert, he uses both Freudian and Marxist methods to analyse the

individual, and allows imaginary praxis and imaginary psychoanalysis to take precedence over real praxis and a serious attempt at psychoanalysis.

Thus the reader of L'Idiot de la famille as a biography of Flaubert is justified in finding it unsatisfactory, and may be led to question who is the real subject of the study.

Who is the man Sartre has put at the center of his *L'Idiot de la famille*?
As an objective study of Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille*, it is largely and
uninformative; as a subjective biographical study of the man who wrote
of the man's mind, it is interesting. In fact, *L'Idiot de la famille*
overall, it is completely and utterly, in every sense of the word,
L'Idiot de la famille as considered as a work of art. It is a work of art.
The man who is the subject of the *L'Idiot de la famille* is a man who is
of a man today? by Sartre himself.

To substantiate this statement, I will attempt to show that the
factors which give a reader a sense of the man who is the subject of
closest examination of the *L'Idiot de la famille* is Sartre's own work.

Sartre. A MAN PERCEIVED? L'IDIOT DE LA FAMILLE AS
Jean-Paul Sartre as A BIOGRAPHY OF SARTRE

by analyzing Sartre's own work, as he has done in his own work,
L'Idiot de la famille. Sartre's own work, as he has done in his own work,
material of imagination, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
a way of thinking of imagination, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
observation, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
third feature of the work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
are presenting things as they are. The work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
imagination resides in the fact that the work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
the features associated with the work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work, as he has done in his own work,
leads it vitality.

Who is the man Sartre has put at the centre of L'Idiot de la famille? As an objective study of Gustave Flaubert, the work is lengthy and uninformative; as a subjective investigation of the inner workings of the man's mind, it is interesting, almost exciting at times, but overall, it is convoluted and tedious. In other words, in no way may L'Idiot de la famille be considered an adequate biography of Flaubert. The man who is the subject of the fundamental question 'What can we know of a man today?' is Sartre himself.

To substantiate this statement, it is necessary to look at the factors which give a reader grounds for making it. However, even the closest examination of the facts will not reveal this as a work on Sartre. In spite of this, I feel that L'Idiot de la famille does have Jean-Paul Sartre as its subject, and will attempt to demonstrate this by applying Sartre's own theory of the imagination, as set out in L'Imaginaire. Sartre ascribed four features to the image, the base material of imagination; firstly, the image is a kind of consciousness, a way of thinking of something; secondly, it may be described as quasi-observation, although in this case the image is always impoverished; a third feature of the image is that when we think with images, we know what we are doing; fourthly, the image is spontaneous, and in imagination we are presenting things to ourselves. The authenticity of the image of imagination resides in the fact that through imagination we can recreate the feelings associated with the real thing. It is its spontaneity which lends it vitality.

In L'Imaginaire¹, Sartre discusses at length the case of our recognising an imitation as a representation of a particular person. He takes the example of the actress Franconay doing an impersonation of Maurice Chevalier. The imitation must be an approximation, because Franconay is a small plump dark-haired woman. However the pointers to Chevalier are clear - the straw hat set at an angle, the cane, the gait. The object which Franconay produces is a feeble form which can always be interpreted in two distinct ways: I am always free to see Maurice Chevalier as an image, or to see a small stout woman who is making faces. Sartre makes the point that it is our conceptual recognition which is dealing with Maurice Chevalier, so that from now on, it is a question of 'realising my knowledge in the material provided for me'. Thus it is always possible in these circumstances for our consciousness to slip from the level of imagination to that of perception. In Sartre's words, 'a hybrid condition follows, which is neither perception nor imagination. It is both.' In the stage setting outlined above, we are seeing Chevalier in Franconay, that is, we are seeing him in our imagination. Mary Warnock comments that 'the performance is in Ryle's phrase, a "stimulus to the imagination"'².

Several critics have regarded Sartre's literary output as an attempt at communication. King noted³ that 'basically Sartre would see the life of Flaubert as an effort to communicate with the absolute through the illusion

1 All references to L'Imaginaire will refer to the English translation; the French edition was unavailable.

J-P. Sartre, The Psychology of Imagination, New York, Citadel, 1966, pp. 34 sqq.

2 Mary Warnock, Imagination, London, Faber, 1976, p. 70.

3 Thomas King, Sartre and the sacred, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1974, p. 144.

of the image. But the communication is not in the brief moment that one is able to believe in the image, it is in the moment of despair when the image collapses.' Although King was discussing communication with a God-figure, and there may be no despair at the level under consideration here, the fact remains that communication may be strongest when the image presented is weak.

In L'Imaginaire, Sartre discusses memory, presenting the reader with a confused picture, which both sets memory apart from imagination, and links them together. Phyllis Morris⁴ showed that for Sartre, memory was a secondary criterion of identity, and that we can remember a past event either as continuous with or discontinuous with the present system.

Both communication and memory were important to Wittgenstein. In Philosophical investigations, he uses the trick-picture of the duck/
rabbit. To some, the image of the duck will be communicated; to others, it is the image of a rabbit; to a few, who have seen it before, it is a trick-picture, and they will see the image as a duck and/or as a rabbit. Wittgenstein considers the difference between 'seeing' and 'seeing as' at some length; that is not the concern of this study. The interesting point is what changes in one's perception when one sees the trick-picture first as one thing and then as the other. Wittgenstein says that the alteration is described like a perception, 'exactly as if the object had altered before my eyes.' The expression of this change of aspect is the expression of a new perception and at the same time of a perception being unchanged. On occasion, Wittgenstein, too, extends the use of imagination to include recognition.

4 Phyllis Morris, Sartre's concept of a person, Amherst, University of Massachusetts, 1976, p. 105.

L'Idiot de la famille is Sartre's trick-picture, his version of Franconay impersonating Chevalier. Throughout the three volumes there are numerous touches reminiscent of Sartre rather than Flaubert, which bring to mind the concerns of the twentieth century rather than the nineteenth.

Parallels exist between Sartre's upbringing and Flaubert's. In L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre discusses at length the social position of Achille-Cléophas, the country boy, son of a veterinary surgeon, who became a city doctor and who instilled in his own son the values of his country upbringing, values which would probably have been outdated by at least a generation. From this picture, Sartre creates Gustave a man who dreams of a pre-Revolution society, such as grandfather Flaubert would have known. In his story of his own life, Sartre wrote:

"Entre la première révolution russe et le premier conflit mondial, au moment que Daniel de Fontanin découvrait Les Nourritures terrestres, un homme du XIX^e siècle imposait à son petit-fils les idées en cours sous Louis-Philippe (. . .) Je prenais le départ avec un handicap de quatre-vingts ans. Faut-il m'en plaindre? Je ne sais pas: dans nos sociétés en mouvement les retards donnent quelquefois de l'avance"⁵.

Thus Sartre himself was raised with ideas more fitting to his grandfather's generation. Still on a personal level, as has already been mentioned, Sartre makes the case that Gustave's mother would rather have had a daughter, so that she could relive her own childhood, but happily. In Les Mots, Sartre says that in his earliest childhood, he was treated rather like a girl, and he had long curls which his mother would not cut, in spite of the insistence of her parents:

5 Les mots, p. 56.

"Anne-Marie tenait bon; elle eût aimé, je pense, que je fusse une fille pour de vrai; avec quel bonheur elle eût comblé de bienfaits sa triste enfance ressuscitée. Le Ciel ne l'ayant pas exaucée, elle s'arrangea: j'aurais le sexe des anges, indéterminé mais féminin sur les bords"⁶.

It is generally acknowledged that there was a very close bond between Flaubert and his younger sister, Caroline, even closer than that between son and mother. Sartre describes how his mother, Anne-Marie, was treated still as a child by her parents, so that he could regard her as his older sister, but still he wanted a younger one. "Aujourd'hui encore - 1963 - c'est bien le seul lien de parenté qui m'émeuve"⁷. In dealing with the world outside the family, it is possible to recognise factors relating to the life of Sartre in his discussion of Flaubert. For Sartre, Gustave was a dunce at school; because, according to Sartre, he could not achieve the place of honour, Sartre had him as the butt of ridicule, an outsider. This does not fit the picture of Flaubert at school gained from other sources, where although by no means an excellent pupil in all subjects, he did produce good work for his literature and history teachers, and furthermore was popular with his classmates, acting at times as their spokesman and leader. Sartre's projection of this image of Flaubert makes more sense if one brings to mind Wittgenstein's trick picture. Memory will inform the reader of Les mots that it was Sartre whose performance at school, at least at the beginning, was atrocious, and who was an outsider in the games of the other children. Perhaps the most profound expression of the link which Sartre felt between himself and Flaubert is to be found in his discussion of the notion 'loser takes all', considered above. Perceived otherwise, this may be seen as the most profound thing Sartre wished to say about himself. Taking the following passage from

6 Ibid, p. 89.

7 Ibid, p. 48.

Les mots as a model, it would seem that this was entirely within the bounds of possibility:

"Je ne relève que d'eux qui ne relèvent que de Dieu et je ne crois pas en Dieu (. . .) Pour ma part, je ne m'y reconnais pas et je me demande parfois si je ne joue pas à qui perd gagne et ne m'applique à piétiner mes espoirs d'autrefois pour que tout me soit rendu au centuple"⁸.

On the political front, the trick-picture works slightly differently. Sartre has Flaubert liken the invading Prussians to the Huns, and the figure of Napoleon III is compared with Nero⁹. Nero, the dictator, is an image which Sartre had used previously, in his political writings, notably those concerned with the Algerian war¹⁰. It is not an expression of Gustave Flaubert's views. Although it is documented that Flaubert resented the Prussians, and their occupation of his native land, the present writer suggests that certain passages do not relate to the nineteenth century invasion of Paris at all. An example of this is¹¹:

"Puisque les Parisiens admirent les Prussiens, [Flaubert] admire la commune qui a tenté - croit-il - d'abolir Paris et tous les habitants et qui - du moins - était aussi un mouvement patriotique contre la capitulation honteuse devant la Prusse."

One may see in this a reference to Sartre's views on the capitulation of Paris in the 1940's, and his support for the Resistance movement, which spontaneously attracted people from all walks of life and bound them together with a common purpose. In the same section of L'Idiot de la famille,

8 Ibid, p. 213.

9 L'Idiot, v. 3, passim.

10 Preface to Albert Memmi, The coloniser and the colonised, London, Condor, 1974.

11 L'Idiot, v. 3, p. 590.

Sartre brings Flaubert forward into the twentieth century¹²:

"on croirait que Gustave a pressenti à près de cent ans de distance, notre stupeur devant Eichmann ou vingt autres criminels Nazis (. . .) on s'attendait, devant l'ignoble grandeur de ce génocide, à voir paraître sinon des princes du Mal, des gens qui fussent en tout cas à la hauteur de leur crime et que l'on puisse haïr: on découvrirait des fonctionnaires tatillons, des bureaucrates qui n'avaient, à défaut de honte, pas même l'orgueil noir de ce qu'ils avaient fait."

Still on a political level, Sartre's discussion of the position of Leconte de Lisle vis-à-vis the negro and slavery reaches much the same conclusions as Sartre had earlier reached and expressed, for example, in the preface to Memmi's The coloniser and the colonised.

Sartre discusses Flaubert's need for acclaim. Although he points up examples through L'Idiot de la famille, the most interesting in the context of the trick-picture is his consideration of Flaubert and public and private acclaim, particularly in relation to the Legion of Honour. He presents¹³, as though Flaubert himself were speaking, the view that under the First Empire, the Legion was only a symbol of the social hierarchy, and although inferior to the 'noblesse d'épée' since it was not hereditary, it nonetheless represented recruitment from above. Sartre goes on to discuss reasons for receiving decorations: Flaubert, he says, had no chance of being decorated:

12 Ibid, v. 3, p. 631.

13 Ibid, v. 3, pp. 561 sqq.

"inutile, il ne nuisait pas; rien à récompenser, pas de raison pour se le gagner. [. . .] Seul Napoléon III, en tant que fausse résurrection de Napoléon I, pouvait distinguer Flaubert et l'intégrer dans une chevalerie illusoire; de lui seul, Flaubert pouvait accepter cette distinction fantôme et discrètement satanique, qui le consacrait aux yeux de tous mais illusoirement sans l'engager à rien ou mieux pour l'inviter à persévérer dans le refus de tout engagement - et d'abord de celui de respecter l'Empereur"¹⁴.

After the fall of the Second Empire, Sartre says, Flaubert refused to wear his decoration, because he did not want to be associated with a regime whose views he did not support. Sartre also claims that official recognition came too late to Flaubert, and its bestowal speeded the process of fossilisation¹⁵. In reading Sartre's interesting exposition referred to here, it is impossible not to think of his own views on public honour. In 1964, Sartre was offered and refused the Nobel Prize for Literature, after the publication of his autobiography, Les mots. His letter of explanation to the Swedish Academy contains many of the points made in relation to Flaubert. Prominent among them is the suggestion that if Sartre were to accept the honour, then he would be tacitly acknowledging the principles of the institution; he felt that he would be compromising both himself and the institution if this were seen to be the case. He was concerned that the prize had not been offered to him at a time when he was actively engaged in a struggle for freedom - his commitment to the Algerian campaign - when official recognition could have made a tremendous difference to the immediate outcome of the situation. He expressed reservations about his freedom to go on writing as he chose, after he had

14 Ibid, v. 3, p. 573.

15 Ibid, v. 3, pp. 660-661.

been awarded such an honour. Finally, he was aware of the danger that in accepting the Nobel Prize, he would have to acknowledge that he had reached the peak of his literary career, that he would become a part of history, and the process of fossilisation would begin¹⁶.

There are many other areas which could be investigated, including the sheer hard work which both men put into their writings, and the concern each has shown for his health, both mental and physical.

These few examples may be sufficient to indicate a parallel between L'Idiot de la famille and the performance by Franconay which Sartre described in L'Imaginaire. We are able to see Sartre in Flaubert, and the work as a whole acts as a stimulus to the imagination. It is also an example in written form of Wittgenstein's trick-picture, and by reading the work it is possible to find oneself in that hybrid condition which Sartre mentioned, which is neither perception, nor imagination, but both.

Yet there is another level to Sartre's portrayal of himself through L'Idiot de la famille. He has set himself up as Flaubert's antagonist. Even though in the Preface he states that he no longer has a score to settle, the reader is often aware of Sartre's desire to be superior to Flaubert. One aspect of this, already briefly dealt with, is Sartre's wish to oppose his masculinity to Flaubert's femininity. Another, more important aspect, is to be found in man's acceptance of his own freedom

16 Dymphna Cusack, 'J-P. Sartre and the Nobel Prize', in Meanjin, No. 101, v. xxiv, No. 2, 1965, pp. 241-247.

to choose his own destiny. Sartre notes: "Il est des hommes que l'histoire a forgés beaucoup plus que la préhistoire, écrasant en eux sans pitié l'enfant qu'ils ont été"¹⁷. He considers himself a man forged by history, whilst Flaubert is a man influenced by 'pre-history' - his childhood and surroundings.

It may be difficult to reconcile this creator of an imaginary world and of a theory of imagination with the activist. However, as Jameson pointed out¹⁸, the starting point of the theory of the imaginary is a theory of the real, which he sums up as follows: consciousness is basically activity; our primary relationship to the world is not a contemplative or static one, not one of knowledge, but one of action and work; the 'world' in the phenomenological sense is not motionless space spread out before us, but rather time, 'hodological' space, a network of paths and roads, a complex organisation of means and ends and projects, unveiled through the movement of my own adventures and desires. Sartre himself put forward the view that freedom of action and freedom to envisage the non-existent are the same. He argues that consciousness must be free if it is able to conceive what is not the case: at the end of L'Imaginaire, he writes: 'For consciousness to be able to imagine, it must be able to escape from the world by its very nature; it must be able by its own efforts to withdraw from the world. In a word it must be free.'

The equation of Sartre's belief in the freedom to act with the body with his belief in the freedom to act through imagination would seem to have

17 L'Idiot, p. 55.

18 Jameson, Three methods, p. 204.

serious implications, particularly in regard to a study of his own life. He roundly condemned Flaubert for his flights into the unreal. In fact, as mentioned above, all of Sartre's biographical studies dealt with the artist struggling with the overwhelming world, and escaping through imagination to avoid being crushed.

In the early 1950's, a new theme appeared in Sartre's work, the difference between an 'acte' and a 'geste'. This was a distinction between a considered, intended action, a real or committed action, and an action which, although it might have been considered and although its consequences might have been the same as those of an 'acte', was in fact a sham, a mere appearance of the real thing. Does this imply that Sartre the committed activist could be considered Sartre the sham? A simple answer to this broad question may be that it does not, for in Sartre's existentialism, the really free man was the one who could live with the consequences of his actions. However, Sartre has, in all his writings, warned that man is a sham. Indeed, throughout Les mots, he constantly reminded his reader that he himself was a sham (e.g., p. 32, p. 114, p. 121), and he emphasised the realness of the imagined or sham state when he said:

"Ce que je viens d'écrire est faux. Vrai. Ni vrai ni faux comme tout ce qu'on écrit sur les fous, sur les hommes. J'ai rapporté les faits avec autant d'exactitude que ma mémoire le permettait. Mais jusqu'à quel point croyais - je à mon délire? C'est la question fondamentale et pourtant je n'en décide pas. J'ai vu par la suite qu'on pouvait tout connaître de nos affections hormis leur force, c'est-à-dire leur sincérité"¹⁹.

19 Les mots, p. 61.

L'Idiot de la famille allows the reader to take part in what is sometimes an exhilarating intellectual exercise, shifting from imagination to perception and back again, all the time aware of the double content of the trick-picture. However, even though Sartre said that he chose for a future the past of a famous dead man²⁰, it is as yet still impossible to appraise L'Idiot de la famille as a biographical study of Sartre. For as Sartre himself stated on several occasions it is impossible to give a meaning to a man's life, to the sum of his actions, until the pattern has been completed by death. Therefore, although it would be possible now to regard Sartre's blindness and ill-health as a death in life, it is essential to wait until the pattern is finally completed before attempting a definitive explanation of his life, even through such a source as L'Idiot de la famille.

20 Ibid, p. 168.

We are familiar with the notion of a person who is constantly changing its appearance and behaviour. In the world of the artist, the familiar becomes a metaphor for the unknown. The artist is a lonely figure, a wanderer in a vast, uncharted territory. He is a man who is constantly in motion, a man who is always on the edge of discovery. He is a man who is always looking for the next step, the next discovery, the next breakthrough. He is a man who is always in the process of becoming. He is a man who is always in the process of creating. He is a man who is always in the process of living. He is a man who is always in the process of dying. He is a man who is always in the process of being. He is a man who is always in the process of becoming. He is a man who is always in the process of creating. He is a man who is always in the process of living. He is a man who is always in the process of dying. He is a man who is always in the process of being.

CONCLUSION; 'UN HOMME N'EST JAMAIS QU'UNE IMPOSTURE'

of the world of art is a world of constant change. It is a world where the familiar becomes the unfamiliar, where the known becomes the unknown. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of becoming, always in the process of creating, always in the process of living, always in the process of dying. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of being. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of becoming. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of creating. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of living. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of dying. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of being. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of becoming. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of creating. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of living. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of dying. It is a world where the artist is always in the process of being.

Metamorphosis, the artist's most powerful tool, is a process of uncontrolled change. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of becoming, always in the process of creating, always in the process of living, always in the process of dying. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of being. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of becoming. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of creating. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of living. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of dying. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of being. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of becoming. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of creating. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of living. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of dying. It is a process where the artist is always in the process of being.

The influence of this work on Sartre's *Le Nausée* is mentioned in the introduction to the novel.

We are familiar with the notion of transformation, of one thing changing its appearance and becoming something quite different. A caterpillar becomes a butterfly, a tadpole a frog; a cliff becomes a sandy beach, water becomes ice. These transformations occur in nature, in the real world. Through the world of fairy tale, from our earliest childhood, we are also encouraged to accept transformation: the frog becomes a charming prince; the loathsome damsel a beautiful princess. To the innocent, transformation both in nature and in fairy tales appears to take place through a magical process.

Transformation both as a process in the real world, and as a process of the imagination is in general terms accepted unquestioningly. The world of art makes much of this acceptance: literature itself is often seen as a transformation of the real world. Within the framework of the art of literature there are two concepts of transformation which are worthy of consideration in relation to Sartre's L'Idiot de la famille. The first is that of metamorphosis, the legendary process of change, which happens as if by magic, and is then imposed by forces external to the subject; the second is that of the actor, who wilfully changes his own appearance, and assumes the form of another person. In each case, the transformed state includes aspects of the former state.

Metamorphosis, Kafka's novel, which details the stages in the uncontrollable change of a young man's body to that of a beetle, emphasises that the young man was an unwilling participant in the process, and that traces of both creatures - human and animal - were at all times present.

The influence of this work on Sartre's writings has already been mentioned¹. Metamorphosis, the palpable transformation of one image into another, as if by magic, is a feature of his later writings. The theory of the imaginary set out in L'Imaginaire is exemplified by the transformation of one presented image into another; imagination and perception are synthesised to create the metamorphic product - a state where both the imagined and the perceived come together.

In some of Sartre's theoretical works, in particular Question de méthode and the Critique as well as in the biographies, he placed an emphasis on death as a metamorphic state. Death contains the whole of life; all of an individual's actions are subsumed in this ultimate and lasting action. In Question de méthode Sartre explained death as a prior condition, in Marxist terms, in the evolution of the historical process; it was the result of a series of actions on the one hand, and the point of departure for another series, being at the same time past, present and future. This is in direct parallel with the process undergone by the observer of Franconay doing her impersonation of Chevalier².

Death was the most significant event of any life for Sartre, because it provided the completion of a series of actions, leaving an unalterable situation. It also allowed one to enter the life at any point, to regard events in the light of their consequences. Sartre realised, as a child, the great potential in this for metamorphosis. The dead could offer no surprises, having done their living; the living could be both what the dead had been

1 Introduction, p.9.

2 L'Imaginaire, pp. 34 sqq.

and something new. In Les mots, he discussed his attitude to death, and demonstrated its importance in life for him:

"Menacé d'abolition, chacun de mes amis se barricadait dans le présent, découvrait l'irremplaçable qualité de sa vie mortelle et se jugeait touchant, précieux, unique; chacun se plaisait à soi-même; moi, le mort, je ne me plaisais pas: je me trouvais très ordinaire, plus ennuyeux que le grand Corneille, et ma singularité de sujet n'offrait d'autre intérêt à mes yeux que de préparer le moment qui me changerait en objet. En étais-je plus modeste? Non, mais plus rusé: je chargeais mes descendants de m'aimer à ma place; pour des hommes et des femmes qui n'étaient pas encore nés, j'aurais un jour du charme, un je ne sais quoi, je ferais leur bonheur. (. . .) Je regardais (ma vie) à travers des yeux futurs et elle m'apparaissait comme une histoire touchante et merveilleuse que j'avais vécue pour tous, que nul, grâce à moi, n'avait à revivre et qu'il suffirait de raconter. J'y mis une véritable frénésie: je choisis pour avenir un passé de grand mort et j'essayai de vivre à l'envers"³.

Thus Sartre indicated that from childhood he was interested in the lives of the dead, to the point where he chose to live his future through a famous dead man.

To what extent this choice was manifest in his biographies is a point which will be discussed later. The fact is that Sartre wrote several studies, including Baudelaire, Saint-Genêt, comédien et martyr, L'Idiot de la famille, and a brief life of Mallarmé. The notion of metamorphosis could be shown to be important to each of these writers, and not only because as writers they engaged in a process of transformation. Jean Genêt, the subject of Saint-Genêt, comédien et martyr, was characterised

3 Les mots, pp. 167-168.

by Brigid Brophy as a metamorphic writer par excellence - one who can transform a man into a centaur in mid-sentence. "Indeed," she continues, "Genêt, down to his very grammar, plays on the cardinal metamorphosis of 'he' into 'she'⁴." Genêt's views on the convertibility, the metamorphic indetermination of the sexes⁵, are well known, and his acknowledged homosexuality has scandalised many. Flaubert is suspected of having been a latent, if not a practising, homosexual. Sartre, as has been noted above, remarked on Flaubert's desire to be a woman. Through his own use of language and through his literary psychoanalysis, he also attempts to further substantiate his claim that Flaubert manifested feminine traits, in other words, that Flaubert, like Genêt, was a metamorphic figure. The subject of another of Sartre's biographies, Baudelaire, wrote a poem which seemed to haunt Sartre. Its subject was *L'Héautontimorouménos* (the poem bears the same name and appears in *Les Fleurs du Mal*), a creature which Sartre introduced into *Les mots* and into *L'Idiot de la famille*. This creature was a mythical monster, exhibiting special characteristics:

"Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue!
Et la victime et le bourreau!"

Thus this creature, too, was metamorphic. However, the interest in metamorphosis, in particular that demonstrated in *La nausée* and *L'Imaginaire* seemed to disappear as a result of Sartre's war experiences. He moved from the world of novelistic creation and the imaginary to the real world of

4 Brigid Brophy, Preface to Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I sat down and wept*, London, Panther, 1966, p. 12.

5 Brophy, p. 13.

political action, and an interest in a different form of transformation appeared.

At this time, Sartre was writing plays and renewing his interest in play-acting. The earlier fascination for metamorphosis as an undesired and uncontrollable transformation, was replaced by an interest based on the actor's transformation as he takes on a role or character. The importance of this shift is that the actor's transformation into his character is intentional, requiring training and discipline. Sartre extended this interest into the political and philosophical spheres through his insistence on the individual's duty to take responsibility for his own actions.

In the early 1950's, as has been mentioned above⁶, Sartre began to draw a distinction between the 'acte' and the 'geste', between the real thing and the appearance of the real thing. Sartre puts forward an interesting argument on this point:

"Genêt says in *Our Lady of the Flowers*: 'If I were to have a play put on in which women had roles, I would demand that these roles be performed by adolescent boys, and I would bring this to the attention of the spectators by means of a placard, which would remain nailed to the right or left of the sets during the entire performance.' One might be tempted to explain this demand by Genêt's taste for young boys. Nevertheless, this is not the essential reason. The truth of the matter is that Genêt wishes from the very start to strike at the root of the apparent. No doubt an actress can play Solange, but what might be called 'de-realising' would not be radical, since there would be no need for her to play at being a woman. The softness of her flesh, the languid grace of her movements and the silvery tone of her voice

6 A man perceived? p. 102.

are natural endowments. They constitute the substance that she would mold as she saw fit, so as to give it the appearance of Solange. Genêt wishes this feminine stuff itself to become an appearance, the result of a make-believe. It is not Solange who is to be a theatrical illusion, but rather the woman Solange"⁷.

Sartre makes the point here that it is necessary to distinguish between the person and the role to be portrayed. Erving Goffman, in Frame Analysis, a philosophical investigation into behaviour in the social context, comments on this⁸, draws a similar distinction between the person and the role, and adds a third term (and therefore a third dimension) - character. He defines his terms as follows:

"I shall use the term 'role' as an equivalent to specialised capacity or function, (. . .); the term 'person' will refer to the subject of a biography, the term 'part' or 'character' to a staged version"⁹,

and goes on to remark that in everyday life, we are more often aware of an individual's role than of his biography.

Sartre makes the individual responsible for his actions. He also believes that the individual is committed to his actions, and through them to other actions. Through any role he adopts, he is also expressing commitment and therefore should accept responsibility for actions committed in that role. Goffman also asks us to consider the matter of responsibility:

"When an individual performs a deed while actively engaged in a particular role and performs the deed by virtue of the role, what liability for the act does he carry away with him to times and places in which he is no longer active in that particular role?"¹⁰

7 J-P. Sartre, Introduction to Jean Genêt, The maids and Deathwatch, Tr. Bernard Frechtman, New York, Grove Press, 1954, pp. 8-9.

8 Erving Goffman, Frame analysis, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975, p. 284.

9 Ibid, p. 129.

10 Ibid, p. 271.

Unfortunately, he seems to skirt around the issue. However, he does make a legalistic case for diminished responsibility, through 'impairment to will or rationality'. Furthermore, he implies here and elsewhere in the work, that society, that is other men, are more familiar with a man's role than with his person, and that to a large extent responsibility is vested in the role. Thus whereas Goffman tends to ignore the person at the centre of several roles, Sartre seems to virtually discount the influence of society in the playing of roles.

That Sartre discounts the influence of society altogether is, of course, not true. He is all too aware of the way in which society labels men through their roles. He is at pains, at least from Baudelaire onwards, to remind us that man is a sham, that he is not what he seems¹¹. In Les mots, as noted previously, he repeatedly informs his reader that he, too, is a sham. Sham, 'imposture', contains more than merely the intention to delude an audience. On the one hand, Sartre repeatedly discussed the deliberate attempt to be someone else, or rather to appear in another role:

"Je feignais d'être un acteur feignant d'être un héros"¹².

On the other hand, he seems to be taking words from the mouth of Iago - 'I am not what I am'. Sartre himself has played many roles. From Sartre's warnings that man is a sham, the reader may be prompted to remember that whatever a person appears as, that is, whatever role he presents, that same person may in other circumstances present other roles.

11 'Rappelons-nous (. . .) qu'un homme n'est jamais qu'une imposture', Baudelaire, p. 94.

12 Les mots, p. 121.

In L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre has attempted to gather together all his roles. Thus he presents the reader with the political anthropologist, the philosopher, the novelist, the literary critic, the biographer; furthermore, he contrives to present these roles more or less simultaneously. At first the reader may be disoriented, in the same way that anyone may be disconcerted by the presentation of a number of roles and patterns of behaviour within a short space of time. The validity of each of Sartre's roles has been examined in the previous chapters of this study. Each aspect of L'Idiot de la famille has been seen as another attempt by Sartre to discover what one can know of a man. Since the work is a biography, the reader is presented with two approaches to the study on this point. Firstly, the approaches enable the reader to investigate Flaubert from a number of points of view, and thus have a deeper understanding of his character. Secondly, each approach, being the product of one of Sartre's 'roles', enables the reader to understand or evaluate the Sartre of that role.

I have argued that Sartre's investigation is constructed in a complex way, analogous with the construction of a prism. That is to say that there are several facets, each of which reflects and refracts the light of the ideas contained, and that there is a core or centre, founded on the theory of the imaginary. Webster's Dictionary includes in its definition of prism/prismatic an indication of the use of 'prismatic' in relation to 'book'. Thus a 'prismatic book' is one which is not only 'sharply faceted, receiving light from many aspects', but it may also be said to 'refract the actual into the prophetic'. Through the construction of the work, the

reader may be aware of more than is actually presented by Sartre. Within Goffman's frame of reference, this may be the same as saying that we learn and understand the 'person' by studying the various 'roles' and analysing the gaps and discrepancies between them. The interaction between the facets of L'Idiot de la famille provides the reader with insight into a broader perspective, and leads to a greater comprehension.

Sartre was concerned with the construction of L'Idiot de la famille, and was keen to remind the reader that he was dealing with a work of fiction. At the beginning of the study, he remarks "C'est une fable; je l'avoue"¹³. The fact that he presents it as a work of fiction lends another dimension to the notion of transformation. A work of fantasy, for example, will bear the seeds of transformation within it; it will play with the reader's/viewer's perceptions, distorting even the most obvious fact. The Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, outlined the basic devices used in fantastic literature. He claimed that there were only four: the work within the work, the contamination of reality by dream, the voyage in time and the double¹⁴. Each of these devices can be found in L'Idiot de la famille. Sartre attempts to take the reader with Flaubert through some of Flaubert's reading and writing experiences, and to give the reader both an insight into the mental processes which produced the work as well as setting out some of the actual writings. That Sartre contaminates reality by dream is difficult to substantiate;

13 L'Idiot. I quote from memory.

14 Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, p. 8.

however, as has been mentioned earlier, he does contaminate reality by imagination. The voyage in time is definitely a device used in L'Idiot de la famille. For example, although the work is claimed to relate to Flaubert's life between 1821 and 1857, there are many allusions to the twentieth century, and to events in Sartre's lifetime. The references to Nazi war criminals is an example of this sort of anachronism. The fourth device, that of the double, is the one around which the chapter, A Man Perceived?, is based. What the reader finds in L'Idiot de la famille is perhaps not so much the intrusion of Sartre the author, but the presentation of a real double: Flaubert, in the 'person' of Sartre.

The presentation of the double through L'Idiot de la famille may remind the reader of a sentence from Les mots:

"Je choisis pour avenir un passé de grand mort et j'essayai de vivre à l'envers"¹⁵.

Much of Sartre's writings was biographical; with the exception of Genêt, the subjects of his biographies were already dead. The reader may infer that through these biographies, Sartre sought a life of his own, and although this is hardly obvious from the earlier works - except that a biographer always has some rapport with his subject - there is evidence to support a case for his desire to live through the life of Flaubert.

"In the beginning of literature is the myth, and in the end as well." So wrote Borges in his Parable of Cervantes and the Quixote¹⁶. Sartre

15 Les mots, p. 168.

16 Borges, p. 278.

believed that Truth and Myth were one and the same thing¹⁷. He used this belief to provide the answer to L'Idiot de la famille's fundamental question - What can we know of a man? The short answer is that man is a sham. However, in this chapter I have attempted to explain the complexity of this seemingly simple statement.

L'Idiot de la famille is, among other things, a study in transformation. The work itself is not what it seems - it is not just a biography, nor is it anthropology nor a novel. It is all of these simultaneously, each clearly definable; but it is more. The methods of investigation used demonstrate the influence of Marx and Marxist thought, as well as that of Freud and Freudian psychoanalysis; there is also the existentialist method, and yet here too, it is not possible to accurately detail the methods used. The Flaubert who is subject of Sartre's study, is also not what one might expect. The character relates only in part to the generally accepted Flaubert, depicted in other biographies. This also emphasises Sartre's earlier statement that 'un homme n'est jamais qu'une imposture'.

Man appears more of a sham if the reader considers the perspective offered on Sartre himself. He presents the various roles he has played, without any attempt to give one priority over the others; thus he is more than he seems at any one time. Furthermore, the central figure of L'Idiot de la famille seems to metamorphose before the reader's eyes. One is reminded once more of Franconay impersonating Chevalier. The central figure is now Flaubert, now Sartre, now an uncanny fusion of the two.

17 Les mots, p. 75.

The importance of the theory of the imaginary in L'Idiot de la famille has been discussed in previous chapters; each facet of the study seems to be based in the imaginary. If the study is considered a study in transformation, then there is no difficulty in regarding Sartre himself as the 'man' of the question, and in accepting that it is his truth which is being expounded in the work through the life of Flaubert. Sartre has given us important information towards a reinterpretation of his own life. Man has many facets: Sartre presents the reader with his many facets. In each, he is actively involved, committed to his various beliefs. Although it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about Sartre's life, since he has not yet committed the final act of death, it is possible to suggest such a reinterpretation. Between the presentation of Sartre's various roles in L'Idiot de la famille, Sartre the person can be discovered. The reader may conclude that Sartre himself is a metamorphic figure: Sartre the activist in the political world is, at one and the same time, Sartre the activist in the symbolic world. Death may give prominence to Sartre's theory of the imaginary, thus lending importance to his actions in the symbolic world, and casting doubt on the validity of his actions in the political world. This seems to be the implicit message of L'Idiot de la famille.

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